

Creative Writing Awards

2024 Selected Poems, Stories, and Memoirs



Penguin
Random
House

In partnership with

WNDB[®]

weneeddiversebooks.org

INTRODUCTION

A Company With Creativity at Its Core

Penguin Random House's commitment to individuality and artistic expression has led to unparalleled success in publishing the best literature by writers in the United States and worldwide. Our company philosophy and dedication to creativity, education, and innovation are the cornerstones of our publishing mission as well as our corporate philanthropic activities. Penguin Random House is passionate about fostering the freedom to create for our authors and our employees. This freedom to create is at the very heart of the Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards.

The Mission

The Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards wants to know what young adults have to say. Our mantra is that we are looking for writing with a strong, clear voice, by authors who are daring, original, and unafraid to take risks. We want to recognize the unique vision and voices of high school seniors with scholarship awards while encouraging student writers throughout the writing process.

The History

In 1993, immediately after establishing its world headquarters in New York City, Bertelsmann sought innovative ways to give back to the city that offered such a wealth of creative talent. Among its many philanthropic ventures was the Bertelsmann Foundation's World of Expression Scholarship Program, designed to encourage, support, and reward young writers and musicians growing up in this cultural capital.

The program began with scholarship awards for excellence in literary and musical expression and then quickly expanded to include programs that would foster that expression. Fall workshops in public high schools across the city offered a jolt of creativity to high school seniors, jumpstarting students to create original work. Classroom

teachers clamored for materials that would help them infuse creative writing into the classroom; World of Expression teaching artists responded with a booklet of lesson plans and staff development workshops for teachers and administrators. A summer writing program for juniors offered an intensive course for developing writers. The World of Expression website provided access to writing- and music-related resources for teachers and students year-round.

Thirty-one years later, and now known as the Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards, the commitment is apparent. Program winners have gone on to study at a wide variety of colleges and universities around the country, from City University of New York to Harvard. Many have also continued their education at trade or technical schools. To date, the program has awarded more than \$2.9 million dollars in scholarships to public high school students for original poetry, memoir, fiction and drama, spoken word, and new this year, Banned Books Prompt compositions. In addition, the program brings together educators, teaching artists, community leaders, authors, and industry professionals (including Penguin Random House executives) to inspire, guide, read, judge, and celebrate the work of hundreds of diverse writers each year.

The Program Today

In 2019, Penguin Random House partnered with We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), a national grassroots organization that advocates for diversity in children's literature, to facilitate the expansion of the competition beyond its origins in New York City to graduating seniors from public high schools across the country. The goal is for youth from coast to coast to join previous recipients, who include award-winning and published writers and journalists as well as distinguished professionals in a variety of fields. Winners will receive a total of \$60,000 in college scholarship funds, in addition to other awards for runners-up.

About WNDB

We Need Diverse Books is a grassroots organization of children's book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people. It is our mission to put more books featuring diverse characters in the hands of all children. You can learn more about our programs at www.diversebooks.org.

2024 SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS—1ST PLACE AWARDS

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AWARD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Book Bans Prompt	Allison Curletto, <i>The Impact of A Wrinkle in Time</i> , Fremont High School, UT

MICHELLE OBAMA AWARD FOR MEMOIR

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Personal Essay/Memoir	Sofia Hernandez, <i>My Everything</i> , Stuyvesant High School, NY

AMANDA GORMAN AWARD FOR POETRY

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Poetry	Anika Bukkapatnam, <i>What's in a Name</i> , Woodbridge Academy Magnet School, NJ

MAYA ANGELOU AWARD FOR SPOKEN WORD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Spoken Word	Kellen Hunnicutt, <i>Our Light</i> , West High School, UT

FICTION & DRAMA AWARD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Fiction & Drama	Ella Ferrell, <i>Obituary for an Eyesmith</i> , Oviedo High School, FL

NEW YORK CITY ENTRANT AWARD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Poetry	Amber Shen, <i>Saran Wrap</i> , Stuyvesant High School, NY

HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Academic Magnet High School, SC	Erin Baylock, <i>O</i> , Poetry
Acton-Boxboro Regional High School, MA	Yiru Li, <i>The Last Meal</i> , Fiction & Drama
Agora Cyber Charter School, PA	Natalie Rice, <i>Of Loyalty and Obligation</i> , Fiction & Drama
Alabama School of Mathematics and Science, AL	Lily Smith, <i>Everything I Tried to Tell You</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
American High School, CA	Jessica Li, <i>The Vanishing Point</i> , Fiction & Drama
Amundsen, IL	Sophia Pedroso, <i>29-Nov-05</i> , Poetry

HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Appomattox Regional Governor's School for the Arts and Technology, VA	Lileana Lewis, <i>Sumeba miyako</i> , Poetry
Barrington High School, IL	Bianca Udeogu, <i>What is Love?</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
BASIS Prescott, AZ	Taylor Phelan, <i>Baby Shoes</i> , Fiction & Drama
Benjamin Banneker Academic Highschool, DC	Morgan Shirley, <i>The Support of Book Banning is the Support of Ignorance</i> , Book Bans Prompt
Boerne Samuel V. Champion, TX	Emma Haines, <i>A Love Letter to People Who Take Up Space</i> , Poetry
Brookfield East High School, WI	Kathy Sun, <i>Intruder</i> , Spoken Word
Cape Hatteras Secondary School, NC	Taylor Mabry, <i>Broken Families</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Century High School, MD	Julia, Zetlmeisl, <i>Master Plan</i> , Poetry
Classen School of Advanced Studies High School at Northeast, OK	Nazgol Missaghi, <i>Tumble Home</i> , Book Bans Prompt
Edward R. Murrow High School, NY	Imogen Claire, <i>Chrysochus Auratus</i> , Fiction & Drama
Edward R. Murrow High School, NY	Isabelle Duperval, <i>Farewell to My Sister</i> , Fiction & Drama
Fairview High School, CO	Aurelia Kembel-Rodriguez, <i>I.M.</i> , Fiction & Drama
Forest High School, FL	Brooke McLaughlin, <i>Naivety</i> , Fiction & Drama
Franklin High School, TN	Abigail Kabagambe, <i>The Glass Library</i> , Fiction & Drama
Gardner Edgerton High School, KS	Jory Chappell, <i>Judith</i> , Poetry
George Ranch High School, TX	Gracey Leal, <i>Apocalypse Later</i> , Fiction & Drama
Geraldine Highschool, AL	Kobe Hill, <i>Born with a Strike</i> , Poetry
Grayson High School, GA	Abigail Melkamu, <i>Echoes of the Unspoken: A Family's Silent Divide</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Guymon High School, OK	Israel Tecum-Ramos, <i>How Far Do You Want To Go?</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Henry J. Kaiser High School, HI	Matthew Iwamasa, <i>Nobody Lives Forever</i> , Fiction & Drama
Herschel V. Jenkins High School, GA	J'Auna, Demming, <i>A Cacophony of Beautiful Symphonies</i> , Poetry
Hunter College High School, NY	Catherine Wei, <i>Strawberries and Solitude</i> , Fiction & Drama
International Polytechnic High, CA	Leyla Olono, <i>Echoes of the Forgotten</i> , Fiction & Drama

HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Jackson High School, OH	Sara Bennett, <i>To Share an Orange</i> , Fiction & Drama
Key West High School, FL	Trinity Curtis, <i>Your Notebook</i> , Poetry
Keystone Oaks High School, PA	Azrael Hurwitz, <i>Changeling</i> , Poetry
Lake Central High School, IN	Jada Parks, <i>Why Not Me?</i> , Fiction & Drama
Lakeridge High School, OR	Cara Chen, <i>Real Art</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Lemon Bay High School, FL	Savannah Grannan, <i>Seeing Purple</i> , Book Bans Prompt
Lincoln High School, FL	Desiree Scorsone, <i>Our DNA</i> , Poetry
Little Rock Central High School, AR	Ananya Uddanti, <i>Infinite Simplicity</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Long Beach Senior High School, NY	Emily Feil, <i>Ugly Questions</i> , Poetry
Los Angeles County HS for the Arts, CA	Skyla Woodard, <i>The Diary of a Young Black Educated Female</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts, LA	Layla Burton, <i>Oh to Be the Daughter of a Sunflower</i> Poetry
Miami Beach Senior High, FL	Sahaira Paz, <i>Dear Mother</i> , Poetry
Mount Juliet High School, TN	Summer Doris, <i>A Letter to Eve</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Mountain House High School, CA	Sejal Ghanate, <i>The Beauty and Pain of Unrequited Love</i> , Book Bans Prompt
Nevada State High School, NV	Caleb Morales-Fuller, <i>Happiest When I'm Purple</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
New Hope-Solebury High School, PA	Caroline Burrows, <i>The Tragedies of 3rd and Market Street</i> , Fiction & Drama
Nonnewaug High School, CT	Rubie Lombardi, <i>To Love and to Lose</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
North Olmsted High School, OH	Makenna Hughmanic, <i>Please, Don't Bury Me</i> , Fiction & Drama
North Providence High School, RI	Alyssa Walker, <i>Madelinanthropy</i> , Fiction & Drama
Ocean Lakes High School, VA	Lambert Edigin, <i>Self-Doubt</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Orange County School of the Arts, CA	Jeffrey Yang, <i>Mother Me</i> , Poetry
Orange Vista High School, CA	Tavon Miller, <i>Harmonyville Chronicles: Threads of Prejudice</i> , Fiction & Drama
Osceola County School for the Arts, FL	Halle Saldivia, <i>Gringa</i> , Spoken Word
Pacific Grove High School, CA	Hailie Atkinson, <i>"Token" "Black" "Girl"</i> , Poetry

HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Palisades Charter High School, CA	Emma Nakaoka, <i>Mismatched Socks</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Parkville High School, MD	Evangelia Mike, <i>The Reflection of My Mother</i> , Poetry
Prescott High School, AZ	Miriam Bryner, <i>Loveless</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Prince George High School, VA	Lorelei Thomas, <i>Receipt</i> , Poetry
Rockville High School, CT	Jordyn Karpoff, <i>The Reality of the Book Bans</i> , Book Bans Prompt
Santa Fe South High School, OK	Channey Guzman, <i>The Importance and Effects of Book Bans</i> , Book Bans Prompt
Shadow Ridge High School, NV	Aaliyah Reed, <i>Lord Knows Our Hearts</i> , Spoken Word
SOAR High School, CA	Tiahna Osorio, <i>Understanding</i> , Poetry
South Walton High School, FL	Sayuri Huffer, <i>Innocence of the Flock</i> , Poetry
Stafford High School, TX	Christiana Otegunrin, <i>Ajo Aye</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Stuyvesant High School, NY	Mary Lee, <i>Avidus</i> , Fiction & Drama
Stuyvesant High School, NY	Kelsey Pan, <i>Dogs, 2018</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Stuyvesant High School, NY	Sophianne Leung, <i>Silver Universes</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Stuyvesant High School, NY	Jin Kim, <i>From the Ashes and Beyond</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Stuyvesant High School, NY	Jason Ng, <i>Mom, Not Mother</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Stuyvesant High School, NY	Kayla Lin, <i>A Calm Artsy Teacher With Not-So-Artsy Crazy Students</i> , Poetry
Thomas Jefferson HS for Science and Technology, VA	Cadence Hodge, <i>Botticelli's Venus, Stuck in Her Shell</i> , Fiction & Drama
Townsend Harris High School, NY	Quinnlan Burke, <i>Two Tables</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Troy Jr. Sr. High School, ID	Ciena Salerno, <i>Freeze</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Walter Johnson High School, MD	Allison Xu, <i>The Misty Lake</i> , Fiction & Drama
Washington Virtual Academy, WA	Aysha Siddiqui, <i>Book Bans Prompt</i> , Book Bans Prompt
Wauwatosa West, WI	Daisy Lehman, <i>Porcelain Girl</i> , Poetry
Wayzata High School, MN	Kaelyn Hvidsten, <i>Banned</i> , Fiction & Drama
Weber High School, UT	Indiana Plant, <i>Faith Crisis</i> , Poetry
Woodland R-4 High-School, MO	Reed Layton, <i>A Tall Tail</i> , Fiction & Drama



Allison Curletto

BOOK BANS PROMPT

Creative Writing Mantra:

I honor my unique skills, senses, and perception of the world around me.

My Hobbies:

My hobbies include reading, sewing, and costume design.

College I Packed Up For: Utah State University



Sofia Hernandez

PERSONAL ESSAY/MEMOIR

Creative Writing Mantra:

"Desires are already memories." –Italo Calvino

My Hobbies:

Listening to music and podcasts, playing sports, traveling,
and playing guitar for my dog, Blue.

College I Packed Up For: Brown University



Anika Bukkapatnam

POETRY

Creative Writing Mantra:

Leave no paper blank. Leave no story unwritten.

My Hobbies:

Embroidery, playing the piano, making chai, collecting music, dancing unabashedly, watching documentaries, writing (of course).

College I Packed Up For: Rutgers University



Ella Farrell

FICTION & DRAMA

Creative Writing Mantra:

“Write it badly, dude. BUT WRITE IT,” because if you’re scared to do something unless it’s perfect, you won’t do it at all.

My Hobbies:

Internet safety, PC gaming, and crafting.

College I Packed Up For: University of Florida



Amber Shen

NYC ENTRANT

Creative Writing Mantra:

Trust the process.

My Hobbies:

Listening to music, bullet journaling, watching movies,
attending concerts, reading books.

College I Packed Up For: Cornell University



Kellen Hunnicutt

SPOKEN WORD

Creative Writing Mantra:

To write is to learn to understand one's self.

My Hobbies:

I enjoy making my own jewelry, thrifting, playing Pokémon, reading, and writing poetry.

College I Packed Up For: Johns Hopkins University

CONTENTS

- 3 **The Impact of *A Wrinkle in Time*** *by Allison Curletto*
- 7 **My Everything** *by Sofia Hernandez*
- 17 **What's in a Name** *by Anika Bukkapatnam*
- 21 **Obituary for an Eyesmith** *by Ella Ferrell*
- 37 **Saran Wrap** *by Amber Shen*
- 41 **Our Light** *by Kellen Hunnicutt*
- 45 **The Perks of Being a Wallflower** *by Nazgol Missaghi*
- 49 **Everything I Tried to Tell You** *by Lily Smith*
- 61 **A Cacophony of Beautiful Symphonies**
by J'Auna Demming
- 67 **The Glass Library** *by Abigail Kabagambe*
- 73 **Gringa** *by Halle Saldivia*
- 77 **The Support of Book Banning is the
Support of Ignorance** *by Morgan Shirley*
- 81 **To Love and to Lose** *by Rubie Lombardi*
- 91 **The Vanishing Point** *by Jessica Li*
- 97 **Seeing Purple** *by Savannah Grannan*

“It is tragic that stories that could help many people feel seen are being suppressed and made less and less accessible.”

—Allison Curletto

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

BOOK BANS PROMPT

The Impact of *A Wrinkle in Time*

By Allison Curletto

Fremont High School

I think perspective comes from life experiences, and that my life experiences are very important to how and why *A Wrinkle In Time* changed my life. Which is why I find it important to first talk a little about myself. I am a 17-year-old teenager from Utah. I was diagnosed with ADHD a little over a year ago, and even before that have struggled with anxiety for as long as I can remember. I am a part of the LGBTQ+ community, and am currently unlabeled but very sure in the fact I am not straight. For me, growing up undiagnosed neurodivergent, I often felt different. I was bullied a lot throughout elementary school and continuing through middle school. Books were always the thing that helped me through the mean comments from my peers or being ignored by the people I considered “friends.” Being diagnosed with ADHD helped me feel much less alone in the way that my brain works, that there wasn’t something wrong with me, and others’ brains work the same way. But, even before this diagnosis I think *A Wrinkle in Time* largely helped me feel less alone and a lot less like there was something wrong with me.

I first read *A Wrinkle in Time* in about the 6th grade. I really connected with Meg Murry from the very beginning. Her quiet personality and awkwardness, even her low self-confidence, were things I could really relate to, and made it easy for me to put myself in her shoes. However, Meg isn’t the only character that is so wonderfully written in this book. Charles Wallace is this genius kid, and instead of him being weird or different, his smarts and connections are presented as strengths. Calvin O’Keefe, despite his hard time with his family, shows so much capacity for love and kindness and is vital to their adventure.

Though I may not have realized this during my very first reading at the time, all of our protagonists in *A Wrinkle of Time* showed some signs of neurodiversity. Whether or not this was intended by L'Engle, it was, and still is, incredibly powerful to read about these flawed characters. L'Engle highlights how important the flaws of each of her characters are to success on their mission. Meg's and the others' travel through all of these different worlds was made even more meaningful by the fact that they all struggled to fit into their own world. For a kid who felt that she didn't fit in, who felt as awkward as Meg, it was so impactful to see a character who had similar struggles and flaws and who felt a similar way to how I did, even if I wasn't traveling through time.

The message of this book is just further accentuated by the antagonist of the book. The most important planet they travel to, Camazotz, exists of everyone and everything looking the same, all controlled by one sentient brain, IT. The true tension for the reader is how unsettling the planet is, how everyone and everything is the same. When our protagonists start to succumb to the power of IT, and lose their personality and individuality, it really is the climax of the book. It is very powerful that in L'Engle's writing, the main antagonist, the true horror they are all fighting against, is being the same as everyone else. With characters who are shown to deal with bullying from peers and struggle with self esteem, it is really interesting that the thing they are fighting against is fitting in.

This book for me, as a neurodivergent and LGBTQ+ kid and teenager, made me feel seen at a time where I felt weird and alone. *A Wrinkle in Time* and the flawed characters, how their differences are represented as a positive thing instead of a negative thing is something that even in the 6th grade, helped my self confidence in the tiniest of ways. This is a book that to this day I still come back and read a good amount. My self confidence has grown since the 6th grade, and I am lucky enough to have a wonderful support system around me, but there are some days where having a little bit of representation of how I felt back then, or how I feel now, is incredibly helpful. Even though this book doesn't target a specific audience or group of people, it has a general message, that many neurodivergent and LGBTQ+ youth can relate to and find comfort in. Representation in any book for any community is so important, but it is especially important for youth in marginalized communities. *A Wrinkle in Time*

made me feel seen just as many other books could make someone feel seen, in a way that they might not normally see in a lot of main-stream media. This book helped me discover myself, made me realize that I wasn't the only one who felt different, and that feeling that way was okay.

While looking through lists of banned books, I saw so many that I had read and found a connection to. *A Wrinkle In Time* was banned for religious references that some didn't appreciate how they were represented. It is tragic that stories that could help many people feel seen are being suppressed and made less and less accessible. I can't imagine how much I would have struggled through elementary and middle school without stories like *A Wrinkle in Time* to help me through the bullying and the self doubt. Stories are so important for so many reasons, but they really can change people's lives. *A Wrinkle In Time* by Madeleine L'Engle has changed my life, and is something that I will always be grateful for and will recommend to everyone I know.

“Only the effervescence of you and Mom
would matter to me, and a smile would
remain painted across my face.”

—Sofia Hernandez

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

PERSONAL ESSAY/MEMOIR

My Everything

By Sofia Hernandez

Stuyvesant High School

Every Saturday, Cel and I would sit eagerly by your side with our little legs hanging to half the length of yours. Our goggles would be down and our tongues out, both with the job of catching the soft snowflakes that fell on the Sugar run at Mountain Creek. I would look below me to the pink goggle tinted snow and swing my legs side to side so that my tiny skis would wave to those below me. We would be about halfway up the chairlift when you would finish telling us one of your stories.

“One more! One more!” Cel and I chanted.

Dad had just finished telling us the story about when he and Uncle José refused to get on their school bus one morning. Mamia had gotten on the bus no problem, but Uncle José had kicked the bus driver in protest and Dad followed his older brother’s lead. The two of them didn’t go to school that day. Instead, Baba stripped them to their underwear and the bed to its fitted sheet and invited the neighbors over to see her delinquent sons turn bright red from embarrassment. Dad claims that he and Uncle José had perfect attendance for the rest of their scholarly careers.

“Tell the fig newton story now!” I giggled and braced myself to hear another one of Dad’s embarrassing stories—one that I had heard 100 times now but never got old.

When he was little, Dad loved fig newtons—ate them any chance he got. For his tenth birthday, Baba threw him a humble party with his siblings, his cousins, and neighborhood friends. To celebrate, she

bought him four boxes of fig newtons. Dad eagerly decided that these fig newtons were not for the party, but rather a present only for him. So to punish his greed, Baba sat him down and made him eat every last cookie until his ego and his stomach were equally pained.

Each time you would tell the fig newton story, your eyes would tear up and your face would be filled by a smile nostalgic for your mom's tough love. But each time you would tell the fig newton story, details would change. First it was two boxes, then three, and then four. One time you threw up and the next you got away with a stomach full of cookies. As a little kid I was sure that the story was changing for dramatization—you needed to keep two six year olds entertained. But the more and more your stories began to change, the more and more I would start to fault it on your waning memory. Soon it was my turn to tell your stories, and I had to compose them out of only the disjointed permutations you left me with. One thing remained the same throughout, though: you never ate fig newtons again.

When we finally finished our long day of skiing at Mountain Creek, Dad spent another 20 minutes ridding Cel and I of our ski gear before finally getting changed himself. Then Cel and I skipped back to the car while Dad followed us holding three pairs of skis, three pairs of ski boots, and his poles. When we got to the parking lot, Cel and I waited patiently for Dad to catch up before once again skipping out to the Jeep.

On the way home, you would stop at Joe's Coffee Shack to pick up a coffee to keep you awake and hot chocolate to keep me and Cel satisfied. On the highway you would blast Barry White's "You're The First, The Last, My Everything," and Cel and I would perform the Just Dance choreography in the backseat. You would watch us through the rearview mirror and cheer us on as you drove. At the time I would be too young to know the feeling of nostalgia, but later I would be too human to avoid it.

Our GPS, which Cel and I had named Molly, would interrupt our dance party by telling you to keep right to exit, but you would just turn her off. You still remembered the way home.

The Jeep took us to other places, too. In fact, Dad practically raised me and Cel on road trips. We drove to Maine, Quebec City, D.C., Florida, and many, many mountains. Dad doesn't remember the first mountain we went to in Vermont, but I'm almost positive it was Mount Snow. Dad spent long hours following Molly's instructions and taking caution on the icy roads, but each time, Molly would be drowned out by Barry White singing for our dance.

On the nights we spent eating out in Vermont, it was customary for Cel and me to "fall asleep" in the backseat so that you would carry us one by one from the Jeep to the hotel room. I would hang my head over your shoulder and open my eyes, grinning proudly because I had tricked you into a free trip to bed and a pass for brushing my teeth. Years later you would insist that I was actually sleeping—that the way my body fell limp in your arms made it impossible for me to have been awake. But I would remember the scene too vividly. And I would start to believe that you just didn't.

The first time the Jeep took us to Acadia National Park, Cel and I were around eight. Like any other road trip, Dad was eyeing me and the book I had open in my lap. We both knew I wasn't actually reading, but I ignored Dad's look of disapproval in the rearview mirror and kept my eyes glued to the world outside my window.

We were about an hour north of our home in New York City, and there was no sign of stopping anytime soon. In fact, none of us, not even Dad, knew exactly where our next stop would be. We enjoyed the spontaneity of not having a destination. Later, Cel and I even got excited at the idea of having to sleep in the Jeep on the off chance that we didn't find a hotel room. But at this point, I was only excited to try Maine lobster for the first time.

Along our route to Acadia, we would venture to various spontaneous destinations: Newport, Boston, Portland, Kennebunkport. In Newport, we would successfully find a hotel to spend the night. Unfortunately for Cel's and my adventurous young selves, there would never be a night that we spent in the Jeep.

In Newport, we would eat dinner at a lobster house, where my cravings would give in and I would eat a whole lobster before hitting Maine. Cel and I would put on those plastic bibs that they give you so that we didn't make a mess; we'd make a mess anyway, but the scene would make for a great photo that would hang on our refrigerator for many years that followed. By the time we finished our lobster it would be late, but you would always be up for a good ice cream afterwards. It would be ten till ten, the time that most shops would close for the night, but we would run if we had to to make it to the closest ice cream parlor.

That night the three of us would all get blueberry ice cream, and discover that the closer we got to Maine, the tastier the blueberries became. We would be making the short walk back to the Jeep when you would pull the car keys out of the pocket of your cargo shorts. But in the process, you would lose your grip on your blueberry ice cream cone. You would try to save it as it fell in what felt like slow motion to the ground, but you would fail, and your blueberry ice cream cone would splat upside down onto the cold concrete.

An expression of disappointment would fill your face in such emotive a way that I wouldn't be able to handle it. You would quickly try and convince me that everything would be okay, but I didn't think it would be unless you got your blueberry ice cream cone. So instead, I consoled you.

It's okay, I would tell you.

And before you would be able to stop me, I would be off. My lousy navigational skills wouldn't fail me this time as I retraced my steps back to the ice cream parlor. You would chase after me but I would render your calls for stopping obsolete as I ran to beat the closing of the store. By the time I made it there, I would be out of breath.

Excuse me, I would say in between pants to the woman who was cleaning the shop to close. We were just here. We got blueberry ice cream, but my dad dropped his on the ground outside our car.

I'm sorry, you would say, showing up just in time to halt any response. It's okay, Sof.

The ice cream parlor woman would accept your apology, chuckling at my seemingly inexplicable terror of you not getting your ice cream cone. Don't worry, she would assure me. And she would go back behind

the counter only to return with a blueberry ice cream cone even bigger in size than the first one.

In that moment, you would have been slightly embarrassed by my obsession over this blueberry ice cream cone, but I couldn't have been prouder of myself. The three of us would get in the Jeep, blueberry ice cream cones in hand, and let Barry White sing us back to our hotel through the Rhode Island night.

* * *

The third time Dad took us to Acadia was during the summer of 2021. But instead of the Jeep, we drove our Honda Pilot, which we had gotten a couple of years earlier to accommodate Dad's girlfriend and her two kids. And instead of Molly, a nameless app guided Dad for the eight hour drive. I had been old enough for the past couple of years that it had become my responsibility to sit in the back seat and book hotels for us each night. By the second or third night of our road trip, I had memorized Dad's credit card information so that I didn't have to consult him while he was driving.

"Can we stay at the Bluenose Inn in Bar Harbor?" I asked Dad, hopeful to recreate some memories for me and Cel.

"Where?"

"The Bluenose Inn. Where we stayed the last couple of times, remember? It had that beautiful indoor pool and free breakfast. And that big bowl of mints at the front desk."

"Lots of spiders, too," Cel chimed in.

I could see Dad's blank expression in the rearview mirror—one that let me know he had no memory of the magical place that Cel and I remembered.

"Remember Dad? They would put out freshly baked white chocolate macadamia nut cookies every morning."

"Yeah, and you always got mad when Sof and I took more than one," Cel recalled.

"Oh, yeah, that one. Yeah, we can stay there," Dad said. But his

expression in the rearview mirror didn't change. I knew that Dad had no memory of the Bluenose Inn, but I went ahead and booked a room hoping that maybe when we got to Bar Harbor he'd remember. Maybe, if I was lucky, he'd remember even more about our first Acadia trip that made up such a magical memory for Cel and me. Just maybe.

On this road trip, after I would finish booking our hotel for the night, Cel would turn up the volume of the music we had queued for the car ride. We would gaze out our respective windows, sporadically making eye contact as we sang along. Lucky for you, I would have recently created a "Dad" playlist that included all of our collective favorites: "Sweet Caroline," "American Pie," an excessive amount of Fleetwood Mac, and of course, "You're The First, The Last, My Everything." After way too much One Direction, I would shuffle my "Dad" playlist for you, and Cel would look at me, disappointed that I interrupted her dance party. I would give her a "don't worry" look back; I knew that if I played Barry White and your other favorites we could all dance even more.

So I pressed play to queue Barry White.

"We got it together, didn't we?" he started. "Nobody, but you and me. We got it together, baby."

I became confused as Dad continued to look out the front window, expressionless and unbothered by the opening of our song. Then, Barry started singing.

"Oh, I love this song," Dad said.

"No, really?" I snarkily replied.

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

I chuckled, entertained by Dad's sarcasm.

But when I looked up at the rear view mirror, tilted just enough for me to see the bottom half of Dad's face, there was no smile present. And quickly, mine vanished. He wasn't being sarcastic. He just didn't remember.

I looked at Cel, who was already looking back at me, thinking the same thoughts. How could he possibly not remember?

"Oh, I don't know. Just a feeling, I guess," I spat out coyly. I couldn't bear to say anything else.

I turned my head towards my window as tears filled my eyes.

Through my blurry peripheral vision, I could see Cel humbly and wistfully performing the Just Dance choreography. I rested my cheek on my arm, blinking at each tree along the highway to try and hold back tears. But I couldn't help it, and soon they began to stream down my cheeks. I watched Dad in his window mirror as he bounced along to the music, hoping that he would miraculously join Cel and do our Just Dance dance instead. I faintly raised the volume to drown out my inevitable sniffles, and Barry White continued to sing even louder to Dad's dance.

"You're all I'm living for
Your love I'll keep for evermore
You're the first, you're the last, my everything."

* * *

A couple of weeks ago, I came home from school to the smell of Dad's dinner and the sound of the music that he was playing through the speaker on his desk. I had been at Mom's for the past week, but the sweetly familiar aroma of Baba's black bean recipe cooking on the stove warmly welcomed me right home.

Blue greeted me at the door with her oldest and dirtiest toy in her mouth—a sign that she really loved me. I gave her a kiss on the head and she followed me to the bathroom, wagging her tail against my legs as I washed my hands.

"Hey Sof," Dad called to me. "When you're done in there, come here. I need to show you something."

After I put my backpack away in my room, I would come over to find you sitting on the couch with a basket in your lap and a photo album open in your hands, imperfectly singing along to John Denver's "Leaving on a Jet Plane."

Look at these, you would tell me, handing me the album.

I would take the album from you, in awe at the photo it had been open to. In the photo, you and Mom sat together in an armchair, your arm laid across Mom's lap and hers around your shoulders. You were both caught looking across the room at a couple of friends, candidly

laughing with some of the biggest smiles I've ever seen on either of you.

By now, the song would have changed to some old song I didn't recognize, but the wistful feeling would remain.

Is that Tony? I would ask, recognizing your friend whose name I recently had to fill in mid-story for you when you couldn't remember.

Yeah, that's Tony. I'm surprised you recognize him here. He was so young.

You all were. Who are the others?

Oh, just some friends I worked with for a while. I can't remember their names right now.

But I would be unbothered. Only the effervescence of you and Mom would matter to me, and a smile would remain painted across my face. You were both so young and beautiful.

I would turn the page to find a photo of Mom sitting in a restaurant, a cigarette in one hand and its pack in the other.

Look at your mom smoking a cigarette, you would say, simultaneously laughing and rolling your eyes at Mom's youthful recklessness.

You wouldn't be able to remember where the photo was set, guessing maybe you two were in Italy at the time. But you and Mom traveled all over during the thought of Cel and me, so I would disregard your doubt and simply smile at Mom's vivacity.

I was still flipping through Dad's old photos on my own when the music changed once again. But this time, I stopped what I was doing when the song began:

"We got it together, didn't we? Nobody, but you and me. We got it together, baby."

And as Barry White continued, I watched Dad through the kitchen window. He looked at me and began to dance as he tended to the black beans on the stove. I smiled at him, and I wondered if he'd done it on purpose. If he remembered our Just Dance nights to this song, and our car rides to Mountain Creek and Newport and Acadia. If he recalled the memories that would become my Ski Lift Storytimes.

But I don't ask. I let myself believe that he did do it on purpose. That he had queued up our song just as I had on those car rides. That

as I looked back at his old photos, he was doing the Just Dance choreography in the kitchen. That he remembered everything.

And Barry White continued to sing to Dad's dance.

"You're all I'm living for

Your love I'll keep for evermore

You're the first, you're the last, my everything."

“My heritage I have to hide
Just to cross your worlds a stride.”

—Anika Bukkapatnam

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

POETRY

What's In a Name

By Anika Bukkapatnam

Woodbridge Academy Magnet High School

I tell you my name

You laugh

You say, "*That is just so foreign*"

I say it was my grandmother's name,

I'll call you something else, then

And, because my mother raised me right

I say sure, why not, you might

And for the rest of my life

You give me a papery name not mine

My name, gifted, from pepper and spice

Was not my name because you found it nice

But, in a flick of a moment, I compromise

Because I don't want you to think twice

Anglicized and dignified

When letters too wide leave you tongue-tied

My heritage I have to hide

Just to cross your worlds a stride

My name, my *me*, you take away
On “Hello My Name Is . . .” it runs astray
And, when I see you the very next day
Amuse me, how do you say your name, babe

Each syllable, a symbol
For ancestors gone through trouble
For a history so terrible
For we can rise from rubble

The title I was bestowed
When out of the womb, I bowed
Morphed into sharp letters, a short clipped ode
Because it won't fit your “default mode”

“Thoughts rattled around in my brain
like marbles as I walked back to the
Eyesmith’s store.”

—Ella Ferrell

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

FICTION & DRAMA

Obituary for an Eyesmith

By Ella Ferrell

Oviedo High School

One of my earliest memories of the Eyesmith was, in a way, akin to a child's first time in a candy store.

I remember coming to a halt in the middle of the street, my mother's groceries hanging heavy on my arm. I remember almost knocking into someone. They might have yelled at me. That part I don't remember.

I do remember the glass.

The Eyesmith's storefront stood out in a way that left no questions as to the nature of its practices. The window was so clear it was almost invisible, allowing a perfect view to the inside trays full of colorful and rounded eyeballs.

I'd heard of the practice before, of course. My mother had several pairs of eyes herself, all in various hues of violets and blues. She'd been talking about getting me sized for my first pair soon—my eyes had come in brown, and no matter how stubbornly she tried, no matter how many eyedrops or creams or serums she applied—they refused to change to blue.

This, though, was my first time seeing them in a display case. Before I knew it, my feet had carried me inside.

If the outside display case had drawn me in, the Eyesmith's store would never let me leave. Eyes of every size and color lined the walls, floating locked in little glass cases full of pale white liquid.

"Oh," a voice said. "What brings you here, errand boy?"

I tensed up, but no reprimand came. Tentatively, I turned around.

The first thing I noticed about the Eyesmith was, most fittingly, his eyes.

They bulged. There was no kinder way to put it; they looked like they were not designed to fit his sockets. He kept blinking owlishly, in what appeared to be a vain attempt to carefully nudge them back into place—or, perhaps, to keep them from drying out.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. “I didn’t mean to bother you.”

“No need to apologize.” He peered down at me from over the counter, hollow and fitted with glass to display even more jars of colorful eyes. “Were you sent here on an errand? What can I help you find?”

“No errand.” It was difficult to find my voice. “I was just looking. I’m sorry.”

“I already told you, there’s no need to apologize.” His voice carried a kind humor to it. “There’s nothing wrong with looking. It’s what eyes are designed for, after all.”

I couldn’t bring myself to reply. I tightened my grip on my mother’s bags and hurried out into the street.

I told myself that, next time, I would walk by. I would turn my eyes downwards and ignore the Eyesmith’s store.

The bell jingled out a cheerful tune as I shouldered my way inside. The Eyesmith looked up when I entered.

“Errand boy,” He greeted. “Here to look?”

I had no time for pleasantries today. I dropped my mother’s bags to the floor and fisted my hands in the pockets of my trousers.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

He blinked at me. “I’m sorry?”

“Does it hurt?” I repeated. “Getting your eyes taken out.”

The Eyesmith stared at me. He opened and closed his mouth

several times, a bit like a goldfish, but no sound came out. I pinched my bottom lip between my teeth and waited.

"No," he said, finally. "Not at all. You'll be asleep during the whole process. When you wake up, I'll have already put your new eyes in."

"Okay." I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Don't you think you're a bit too young for new eyes?" He asked, and leaned over the counter. His lips were lifted into an amused smile, as if he thought I couldn't possibly be serious.

"My mom's taking me to get new ones soon," I informed him. "She doesn't like how they came in brown. She wants me to have blue ones. Maybe violet. Like hers."

The Eyesmith, for a reason I couldn't quite grasp, suddenly looked incredibly sad. "Oh," he said.

"I think I'd rather have blue ones." His stilted sentences were unnerving me, so I fought to fill the silence with my own chatter. "Hers are violet, but I don't like them. I think blue is a much nicer color. Don't you?"

The Eyesmith didn't reply.

"I have to go now." I picked my mother's bags up off the floor.

The Eyesmith was silent still as I stepped back out into the street. When I turned back to look, I saw him hunched over behind the counter, his head in his hands.

The Eyesmith's doorbell was a familiar sound to me by now. Today, though, he wasn't behind the counter.

I had no idea why I'd come in here today. I had no questions to ask, and too many errands to run. That didn't stop me from setting my bags down beside the door and drifting off to study the colorful jars that lined the store walls.

"You're back again," the Eyesmith said. I turned to see he had come from a back door, a tray of glistening eyeballs in his hands. "Do you have another question for me, errand boy?"

"I'm just here to look today," I told him. "What are those?"

"Fresh eyes," He replied. "Do you want to take a closer look?"

He set them down on the counter. I hesitated, somehow sure this was a trick, but gave in to my curiosity and joined him.

"They're so wet."

"They haven't been sealed yet." He gently turned one over with a gloved finger. A lazy green iris rolled skyward to face us. "Once I coat them properly, they'll dry out a bit so they're not constantly oozing."

"Oh."

"Did you want to help me?"

I had errands to run, but—"Can I?"

"Certainly. Let me go get the paste." The Eyesmith nudged over a stool for me to stand on. "Wait here."

I did. It was much easier to see over the counter with the stool.

"Here you are." The Eyesmith set a glass jar down on the counter next to the tray and swirled the brush in the thick glue. "You have to try and apply it evenly. If it's too thick in any spot, it'll harden and dry out. They're impossible to fit in the sockets if that happens."

"What if I mess up?"

"Then I'll make more. These are just display replacements, anyway. They're not actually going in anyone's sockets." He rapped his knuckles on the counter. "Can I trust you with this? I need to step into the back for a moment to file some paperwork."

"Okay."

The corners of his eyes crinkled up into a smile. "Thank you."

Just like that, he left. I was all alone in the Eyesmith's store, a jar of sealant and a tray full of eyes that needed to be coated on the counter in front of me.

The sudden rush of responsibility thrilled me. I wasn't being supervised. I wasn't being berated. With a newfound confidence, I picked up the brush with unsteady fingers, swirled it in the paste like I'd seen the Eyesmith do, and pinched the first eye—the green one—between my fingers.

It slipped free and dropped to the floor.

My heart plummeted into my stomach. I dropped the brush on the counter and scrambled after it, but no matter how hard I tried, no matter how many times I thought I'd finally cornered it, I would inevitably drop it again.

I chased it to the corner of the store and blocked it off with both hands. Before I could even really think about what I was doing, I snatched it up in my fist, clenching it tightly so it wouldn't escape.

It burst.

Liquid soaked my hands and ran down the length of my arms. Goo splattered on the shelves and all over the floor, and I was left with nothing but an empty wet sac where an eyeball had once been.

"Oh dear," a kind voice said. "What happened in here?"

I couldn't bring myself to meet the Eyesmith's eyes.

"Errand boy," he said, softly. "What happened?"

Then, to my astonishment, "Are you alright?"

"I—I dropped it," I stammered. "It was slippery. I tried to catch it, but—"

"It burst?" He crouched down behind me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Oh dear. That's quite messy, isn't it?"

Wordlessly, I nodded.

"That's alright. It's my fault, anyway." He reached over and plucked the empty sac from my hands. "I realized as soon as I left that I didn't leave you with the proper devices for coating it. You really do need either a stand or some good gloves."

"I'm sorry." I swallowed down a lump in my throat. "I—I can pay for it. How much do eyes cost? I—"

"Errand boy." He stood up, and I finally allowed myself to look at him. He didn't look upset in the slightest. "Please. Stop apologizing. It was a display replacement, remember? It costs nothing to replace."

He surveyed the slime trails across his fine tile floor. "About this mess . . . How about I get a mop and take care of all of this while you get cleaned up?"

"It's my mess," I insisted.

"And it's my store." He dropped the eye sac into a bin next to the door. "I've got a sink in the back. Here, I'll show you where it is."

"I should probably leave after this," I told him. "My mom doesn't like it when I'm home late."

"Your mother." He held the back door open for me. "The sink's in the corner. Is she still set on getting you replacement eyes?"

"She's going to have the appointment scheduled by the end of the month."

The Eyesmith pursed his lips into a thin line.

"I think she's going to bring me here. You'll make sure I get the right color blue, right? I don't want violet eyes. Not like my mom has."

"Errand boy," he said, slowly, "Do you want to get your eyes replaced?"

Did I want to?

I hesitated halfway to the sink, slime leaving wet trails down my arms and coming dangerously close to my sleeves. Instinctively, I almost reached to fist my hands in my trousers, but at the last minute remembered to hold them out to the sides instead.

"I . . . don't," I told him. "I like my eyes. They're different from my mother's. I'd like to keep it that way, I think."

Slowly, the Eyesmith nodded. He seemed lost in thought.

"I'll see what I can do," he replied.

"WHAT?"

I cringed back in the examination chair, but the Eyesmith stood firm. He peered down at my mother with his bulging blue eyes.

"I told you, miss," he repeated, evenly, "I can't fit your child with new eyes. The socket shape is too deep. None of the eyes would fit."

"That's absurd," my mother scoffed. "Make a new mould. Or something! It cannot possibly be that hard."

"I'm terribly sorry, miss, but I can't simply make a new mould. I would have to recalibrate all of my machines to different settings. It would be a nightmare."

My mother's grip on my shoulder was crushing. "Then I shall take my son somewhere else."

"With all due respect, miss, there is nowhere else." The Eyesmith folded his hands together. "I am the only qualified Eyesmith on this half of the mountains. You would have to make a long and harrowing trip by wagon just for my fellow smiths to tell you the same thing; the sockets are too deep. It's impossible."

"I've never heard of such a thing before," she spat. "You have to be lying. Let me see!"

She wrenched my face upwards and pulled my eyelids apart. My heart lodged itself firmly in my throat as she peered down at me, violet eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"I would never lie to one of my patrons." The Eyesmith's even tone had taken on a bit of an edge. "Especially not someone as reliable and frequent as you, miss. Again, I'm terribly sorry."

My mother's lip curled, but she let my face go. "Fine. Can you recommend any different serums, then? His eyes are so different from mine."

"No serums. It's hard to change the color of brown eyes once they come in. I assume you would know this from experience?"

Her glare was withering. "What are you insinuating?"

"You've asked me for serums before, miss." The Eyesmith inclined his head towards me. "For your child, I assume?"

My mother said nothing. Her shoulders were drawn so tightly together, I almost thought they were going to snap.

"Fine, then," she announced, in a tone that invited no further arguments. "Thank you for your . . . service."

"But of course, miss," The Eyesmith said, and bowed his head again. "Have a pleasant day."

As soon as my mother's back was turned, he (as subtly as one with large eyes could manage), winked at me.

The next day, I didn't even hesitate. I barged into the Eyesmith's store and slammed my hands on the counter.

"You lied to my mother," I said. "My eye sockets aren't deep at all. They're the same as everyone else's."

"Oh, really?" The Eyesmith raised a single wispy eyebrow. "I must have made a mistake then. Shall I call her back?"

"Wh—no," I spluttered. "No. Just—why?"

"Hm?" He slid a piece of paper across the counter towards me. "I just told you, it was an honest mistake."

"You're lying again, and you . . ." I hesitated, staring at the paper. Tentatively, as almost if it were glass, I picked it up in both hands. "You . . . what's this?"

"I'm looking for an apprentice," The Eyesmith replied, and turned to store the remaining papers he was holding away in a box.

"But—but—" The paper began to crumple from the strength of my grip. "Why me? I dropped the eyes you let me coat. Remember?"

"You can't seriously be expecting to stay with your mother forever," He said, and held a quill pen out to me. "Are you?"

Silently, I reached out to take it. I stepped up onto the stool and smoothed the application paper out on the counter.

"My mother will never agree to it."

"It can be arranged. If that's what you want, of course."

Did I want this?

I did. It was an opportunity to do something of my own, for once. An apprenticeship would free me of my mother's demands.

"I don't think I can." Hesitantly, I set the quill down next to the application paper. "I don't know anything about the eyesmithing trade. I'll just mess everything up like I did the other day."

"I'm taking you on as an apprentice, not a business partner." The Eyesmith pushed the quill back towards me. "If that's the only thing you're hesitating on, then you have nothing to worry about. Appren-

tices are supposed to learn the trade from nothing. You're not expected to be a master at the trade from the beginning."

"I—I think I need some time to think about it," I told him.

"Of course." He blinked at me. "You know where to find me." I nodded.

"Thank you. For the opportunity, I mean."

He waved a hand dismissively. "Think nothing of it."

* * *

Did I want to become the Eyesmith's apprentice?

The answer was obvious. Of course I did. It was the opportunity of a lifetime—a real, genuine way to step out from under my mother's control. One she couldn't touch or weasel her way into. It was perfect.

But was I?

Thoughts rattled around in my brain like marbles as I walked back to the Eyesmith's store.

Was I? Was I? Was I?

"Errand boy," the Eyesmith greeted, snapping me out of my thoughts. When had I stepped inside? When had I arrived at the counter? "Have you made up your mind?"

"I—" I opened my mouth and let it hang. I couldn't find the air to form any words. "I . . . I do." I was supposed to say no. Why didn't I?

"Wonderful." He set the application paper down on the counter in front of me. It was the same one as the other day; I could tell. It was still crumpled.

"You promise you can get my mother to agree?"

He bowed his head. "I do."

I poised the quill over the paper. My name . . . ?

Belinda. It was what I'd always wanted to be called. Seeing the letters fill the page, so much longer and so different than my old name, felt like putting on clothes that fit for the first time. Really fit, perfectly snug against my body, not just big enough for me to wear.

The Eyesmith peered over the counter at my signature with raised eyebrows. I bit down on the inside of my cheek, hoping he wouldn't notice—or, maybe, that he wouldn't care.

"Ah," he said, recognition lighting up his eyes. "Errand girl, then?"

Answering his question with a nod was the most powerful I'd felt in years.

* * *

I started growing my hair out. I didn't notice how long it had gotten until it was falling in my eyes. The next day, a pair of silver ribbons appeared on my workbench.

"Do you like them?"

I paused, a ribbon stretched between my fingers, and turned. The Eyesmith was lingering by the door, fingers laced together in front of him, waiting.

"The ribbons?"

"I thought you could use them to tie your hair back. It'll get in the way of your work otherwise."

"You're not going to make me cut it?"

He blinked at me owlishly. "Why would I?" And so, I started tying back my hair.

Neither of us were very good at it. The Eyesmith had almost no hair to speak of—it had all thinned into wispy clouds atop his head—so our first attempts at ribbon-tying looked more like a messy tangle of knots. I ended up atop the counter, back facing him as he carefully snipped the ribbon out of my hair with a pair of surgical scissors.

It didn't occur to me how the Eyesmith suddenly knew how to braid my hair. All I knew was that, one day, he swept it back over my shoulder and tied it back for me. It wasn't until I noticed a light on in his office at night that I saw him—a tangle of yarn taped to the edge of the desk and the Eyesmith, face scrunched up in concentration, trying to weave the three strands together—that I knew.

The very next night, I picked up one of the textbooks on eyesmithing he'd given me—previously left dusty and untouched—and started reading.

* * *

"Belinda, we're going to need more red dye. Ruby eyes are surging in popularity again. Apparently it's in fashion with the nobility now."

I shoved my goggles up my face and looked up from the moulding machine. "Have we gotten any orders yet?"

"Only a few. Where there's a pattern, there'll be more."

I clicked my tongue. "I'll bring the wagon into town tomorrow. I should be able to get some more then."

"Perfect." He made note of it on our parchment list, tacked to the wall with a stray nail. "Oh, and you're scheduled for a sizing this afternoon at three. Don't forget."

"Oh, god," I muttered. "A sizing. On my own?"

"You're more than capable." He tucked the quill pen behind the list and swept off to a corner of the room. "Besides, it's just a sizing. Length, width—"

"Depth," I finished. "What if I poke their eye out? The instruments are so small, and so delicate, and—"

"Belinda." The Eyesmith's voice was calm and steady. "You've had plenty of practice sizing my eyes. Have you hurt me?"

"Once."

"I flinched." He waved a hand, as if he's swatting that idea away like a fly. "It wasn't serious." His eye still had a red scar down the side. It twitched sometimes.

Which reminded me.

"Why don't you get new eyes?"

"Hm?"

"New eyes." I slid off the stool, careful not to lean on the moulding machine. "Yours . . . they don't—they're—"

“Big?” He supplied. “Unsettling? Amateurish?”

I didn’t even have a chance to apologize before he brushed my worries away with a kind laugh. “It’s nothing I haven’t heard before a thousand times, Belinda. You couldn’t hurt my feelings if you tried. No, these eyes are special to me. They were my first pair.”

“Your first natural pair, or—?”

“The first pair I made myself. I was an apprentice once too, you know. My master sent me to the back with a vat of paste and a handful of dyes and told me to make myself a pair of new eyes. They came out wrong, of course. I had only the most basic understanding of how to mould eyes. The left one hardened. It still gets stuck sometimes.”

I’d noticed. I hadn’t said anything. “But you put them in anyway?”

“She made me fix them first, of course. Had me try all sorts of different soaks and polishes to get them to fit, and even then, it was barely. I was losing sight in my natural pair by then anyway—any replacements, no matter how shoddy, would do a better job.” He straightened a pile of paper on his desk and slipped them away in a manilla folder. “It was her way of teaching me what an improper job looked like. In her eyes—” He chuckled a bit at his own joke. “If I did it wrong on purpose once, I’d never do it wrong again.”

“Did you?”

“Oh, certainly. I made plenty of mistakes. The important thing was, I learned how to fix them.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” I balled my hands in the fabric of my skirt. “You could’ve made yourself another pair. You’re way better at that now, right? It would be easy.”

“I’ve gotten accustomed to these old things,” he replied. “Besides, you know the biggest reason why people want new eyes. Tragedy. They want eyes that haven’t seen those kinds of horrible things.”

He hesitated for a moment, his hand on the handle of his desk drawers. When he did speak, his voice was careful. Measured. “There are certain things that I’d . . . rather not forget. They were good lessons for me.”

He didn’t elaborate. I didn’t pry.

I sized the customer’s eyes perfectly that day. I couldn’t help but

notice the relief written plainly in their face when I announced they were approved for a new pair of eyes.

* * *

Years passed. At some point, I graduated from the Eyesmith's apprentice to his coworker. Customers would defer to me as often as him for sizings and fittings.

I hadn't thought about—or even seen—my mother in ages.

"She's dead."

The Eyesmith's words brought both my thoughts and the machine I was working on to a screeching halt.

"Who?" I already knew.

"Your mother." I didn't need to look up to read the expression on the Eyesmith's face. Careful. Patient. "Alcohol poisoning. That's what the coroner told me."

I didn't know she drank alcohol. "Oh."

"There's a funeral in a week's time. Her—your uncle, that is—he asked for you to attend." There's a heavy pause. Then, "He asked for his . . . nephew, that is. I told him I knew no such person, but he was insistent."

Nephew. The word left a bitter taste in my mouth.

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't want to go." My tone was even, but my hands were shaking. "To the funeral."

"You're in luck," The Eyesmith replied. "You have a fitting scheduled that day. Isn't that convenient? I'll have to tell your uncle that we're both very busy."

There was no fitting. Not until the Eyesmith bumped a customer's appointment up a day, that is.

I never thought I'd be grateful to be leaning over an unconscious body, carefully severing the nerves that attached to their eyes, but I was. More than anything.

* * *

It was a cold day in autumn when the Eyesmith died.

There was no fanfare, no tearful farewells, no nothing. I ducked into his study to ask him a question and found him slumped over in his chair, skin cold and eyes staring at nothing.

It was four days from his birthday.

I was well into my twenties by the time. I had no idea how old the Eyesmith was. I had never asked.

There were so many things I had never asked.

* * *

"I'd like to thank you all for coming out today."

Hundreds of pairs of eyes stared up at me from the graveyard field, dusted in a thin layer of white snow.

"I know some of you are probably here to ask about your canceled or missed appointments." I held my hand up in the air in what I hoped was a placating gesture. "Thank you for being so understanding during this difficult time. I'm working on getting all of your fittings and sizings rescheduled. You can expect to hear back from me within the month."

There was some tittering from the crowd.

I had agonized for days over what to put in my speech. What was I supposed to say? Where was I supposed to begin? Even the wording tripped me up. I hadn't gotten a good night's sleep in weeks.

I took a deep breath and continued.

"My mentor and late father," I began, ignoring the murmurs that followed this statement, "was, as most of you know, an incredibly skilled Eyesmith. I've often heard he was the best on this side of the mountains, and that's being humble. Looking around the crowd, I can recognize some of his work in your eyes even today. He was a man who was efficient, orderly, and courteous to others . . ."

* * *

Work picked back up the following week. I couldn't keep the Eyesmith's store—my store—closed forever.

There was a mountain of backed-up appointments to sort through and, once that had been finished, an even larger mountain of people seeking to book appointments that I needed to handle. More times than I can count I found myself pausing the moulding machine and looking over my shoulder, expecting the guidance of someone who was no longer there.

But the appointments went smoothly, and the eyes got made, and things settled back into the ebb and flow I had been so used to once again.

The only difference was that this time, I was alone.

Weeks turned into months into years. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I no longer felt confused by my own reflection.

The customers called me Belinda. They never knew me by any other name. There was no mother around to tell them otherwise.

There were other mothers, however. Parents who I could tell were like mine. They were all turned away with the same excuse, their relieved child in tow. Too deep, too wide, too shallow. It won't fit. The mould won't work.

I told myself that, one day, I would take on an apprentice, but the entire process seemed too daunting. How was I supposed to find one? This was a task that I had no prior instruction for.

Where was I even to begin?

As it turned out, the answer was much the same as mine. A young girl, basket in hand, staring slack-jawed at the jars of eyes lining the shelves.

I leaned over the counter.

"Errand girl," I said, my voice weathered by age, "What brings you here?"

i wish i could fling
all my thoughts out of my mind,
but my brain has no trash can to dump
them into,
only a ceiling fan for fading thoughts to
drift up and away

—Amber Shen

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

NYC ENTRANT

Saran Wrap

By Amber Shen

Stuyvesant High School

there's a roll of saran wrap in my kitchen
always there, never running out or needing to be refilled
clear and clinging to my hands until
i smooth it over the edges of the porcelain bowl
salmon and rice, miso soup, tomato and eggs

put the bowl into the fridge, close the door,
for later,

tomorrow,

another day

never think about it again
until it's about to expire or the fridge becomes too full,
and you can't squeeze a bowl inside
without pushing out another

the kitchen of my brain
is always cooking up thoughts
about school,

tests,

college

thoughts i don't want to hear

worries baking in the back of my mind
for hours on end
until they come out charred and black

at first: *you'll never live up to your brother*
and then: *you'll be a disappointment just like him*
and always: *you won't get into a good college*
all of your friends are smarter and better than you
everyone thinks you're a tryhard and stuck-up
and annoying

i wish i could fling
all my thoughts out of my mind,
but my brain has no trash can to dump them into,
only a ceiling fan for fading thoughts to drift up and away

so i wrap my thoughts in saran wrap
(tightly, so nothing can leak out)
and shove them into the overflowing fridge of worries,
the cracks and crevices, *squeezing squishing it*
into any space i can find

sometimes, i take out a few thoughts, r e a r a n e g r them,
so there's more space for another worry;
but only for short amounts of time

never for too long,
for fear of what'll happen if i do

i know a day will come
where my fridge becomes too full
and all of those thoughts will explode out of it,
ripping through the saran wrap
that won't be able to hold them in

but for now, my anxious and worrisome thoughts
are secure in saran wrap, deep in the fridge
at the corner of my mind

“I shined like clementine sunsets
brimming in twinkles, admitting
I wanted to kiss gold.”

—Kellen Hunnicutt

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

SPOKEN WORD

Our Light

By Kellen Hunnicutt

West High School

Every night, I laid in my blue bedroom, gazing up at plastic stars that dotted my ceiling.

The lightbulb above my desk was the sun, and the glow-in-the-dark planets and stars made up

my very own solar system. I could jump up and hit Saturn's ring off, sending cosmic energy

clattering to the carpet—I held enough energy to split apart galaxies.

In this dark room, I could think forever.

Where I lived, darkness was not taught, only implied in the grandparents' house,

in the awkward aura we collectively embodied when we witnessed blinding brightness or

rainbows. Little did I know there was glistening gleam and glare in my blood, in my veins, in my

heart, in every breath I took, echoing outward from glowing lungs.

I caught a glimpse of illumination in the mirror, sitting in a lump on my tongue,

like a chunk of glass reflecting the sun. I shut my mouth tight and tried to forget but I could not

fall asleep, not with luminescence searing the inside of my mouth like hot stew. I stared up at the stars, and silently thought about kissing you on your soft lips, becoming light.

I tried to stay close-lipped, but this blaze did leave my insides, leaping out despite holding on tight to my tongue: a girl witnessing when I googled "what to do when you can feel light burning the inside your body and brain?" She just smiled, didn't care at all.

I let out light on purpose for the first time to the first sparkling person I met, someone sunshine. I did it over text because I didn't want to see a reaction. But they cheered for me, and I radiated starlight in my smile. I began to spark like fireworks and everyone welcomed my orangey warmth. I shined like clementine sunsets brimming in twinkles, admitting I wanted to kiss gold.

There were three more people who I needed to embrace in luminescence.

I convinced myself it had to be tonight. Every detail is burned into the back of my mind: the bratwurst and mashed potatoes we ate, the drums crackling in my throat, the thought I might choke on the blaze blistering my tongue. Oh, but I was brave.

I opened my mouth and released like a deep exhale and the whole room flickered for a moment in silent shock.

My sister didn't even know what light meant, Dad had to explain it to her.

Mom held me as we cried, and I began to sparkle all over, my skin fading into transparency,

shimmering the energy beating and bumping in my blood, in my heart, in my veins, in my lips.

I opened up wide and now I live in illumination and spend my time smiling and cuddling and

playing in your radiance.

I know I'll kiss you again tomorrow,

My boy.

“Since then, my love for books has
skyrocketed as I rely on new and familiar
words for guidance, advice, and healing.”

—Nazgol Missaghi

Honorable Mention

BOOK BANS PROMPT

The Perks of Being a Wallflower

By Nazgol Missaghi

Classen School of Advanced Studies High School at Northeast

Arguably, the most exciting part of a new book is the author's dedication; I am equally disappointed when there is not one (or one without much explanation). My favorite dedication comes from *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*: "For Lilah, smash the patriarchy, sweetheart." Fitting for the strong-willed story that followed. But often, books do not have much of a dedication *if anything*, and I am left wondering why. So, it was no surprise when my favorite book, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, was dedicated to his family and just that. I meticulously turned over each page in the front and back, searching, *there must be more*, before giving up. In times like this, I give my own, additional, dedication: *For those with an unconventional idea of love and home*. However, access to a good book has never been guaranteed.

Going to a public school in Oklahoma, books have been banned by school boards for content that's "too mature." Teachers have grown scared to teach and share books communicating themes of gender, crisis, race, and sexuality for fear of losing their jobs. This restricts educational experiences. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is a banned book due to depictions of "sexual abuse, LGBTQIA+ content, drug use, profanity, and possibly sexually explicit scenes." I will fight for the freedom to read because of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

A signed copy of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was given to me by my German teacher after reading the first draft of my Common Application personal essay. From chapter to chapter, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* turned increasingly haunting and beautiful. I

finished it in one evening at the corner of my local bookstore with a mug of cocoa gone cold and a half-eaten blueberry scone. I felt transparent. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was an anecdote to my life, published nearly a decade before I was born. Chbosky described resilience and the bittersweet ache of human relationships in ways I had never expected or thought to explore. I was forced to empathize with characters like Mary Elizabeth, who painfully mirrored myself. It lit a fire inside me that I had not felt since meeting Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* in middle school. Since then, my love for books has skyrocketed as I rely on new and familiar words for guidance, advice, and healing.

Last week, my German teacher gifted me a collection of Stephen Chbosky's stories. *Maybe this will find you when you're looking for a good read someday, H.M. 2023*. I decided that if I were ever to write a book, my dedication would be this: *Thank you, Herr McKenzie, for knowing me better than I know myself.*

Words have power and deserve to be celebrated. Book bans are set in place because people are afraid. Literature drives intellectual freedom, fearless exploration of ideas, and a diverse understanding of the world. I will continue to educate others—affirming my admiration for books with compassion for their content and how they have shaped who I have become. I will fight for the freedom to read because of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Herr McKenzie.

“Her small eyes peered at me over the large
frame of her violet coke-bottle glasses.”

—Lily Smith

Honorable Mention

PERSONAL ESSAY/MEMOIR

Everything I Tried to Tell You

By Lily Smith

Alabama School of Mathematics and Science

I look like my father, at least that's what I'm told.

My eyebrows, thick and dark, furrow like His, leaving a crease in the skin that can't be buffed out. My nose is upturned, and even that mirrors His own, the same quirk of a bump in the bridge. My hair is brown, well, the roots are. Blonde dye is unable to fight off the inevitable turn into His color.

I often find myself searching for the differences, something to call my own, but even in the way my face rests, in its concerned manner, is His.

It's not always been an issue for me. When I was younger, I attended the same elementary school as my older siblings, only one grade below. On the first day in the brightly painted halls, my arm was grabbed, which would have been strange if it weren't for the familiarity of its grasp.

It was Mrs. Dott, a regular attendee of Solid Rock Baptist Church on Rose Road and evidently my first-grade teacher. Her hair was graying, the same with her eyes. She wore a long, starched blue dress that made my skin crawl at just the thought of wearing it myself. She towered over me, despite being a small woman herself. Her small eyes peered at me over the large frame of her violet coke-bottle glasses.

"Bug, you are just the spittin' image of your daddy."

Ironically enough, she did spit slightly when she said it, causing my lip to twitch in spite of my desire to remain as still as it could. She smiled when she said this, but there was a looming presence of what some like to call "southern condescension."

Feeling my face heat up, I tugged my arm from her hold. I was old enough to know I couldn't just pull away without some form of reaction, so I avoided her gaze with an awkward smile and nod, opting for a timid; "Yes, ma'am."

She continued, not picking up on my pleading eyes to move into the classroom. "If I didn't know no better, I'da guessed you was Michelle's too. Look just like yer sisters."

We had different mothers, my siblings and I. There were seven of us. I was the only one who wasn't "Michelle's" but the strength of the genes aforementioned in the mirror made us look practically identical at this age. A red stamp on my forehead, one that staked a claim.

Before this, I was never aware of the ladies that whispered about it. Somehow the way Mrs. Dott alluded to knowing better made me conscious that others were aware of the glaring differences.

My eyes are blue, Father's were brown. Mother's were blue. My skin is pale, littered with dark brown moles, sporadically placed. Somehow their placement made me feel even closer to Mother, frustratingly so.

My stature was almost identical to Her's, down to the posture of my slumped shoulders and the way my feet planted outward when I stood. My cheeks are dusty pink, my lips are folded to a bow, and my eyes are round. So were Her's.

When I was young, there was some sense of pride I held in looking like Her. Anytime the delicacy of Her features was tied to me, my heart would swell.

Ladies in town would fawn over softness, something that could only be traced back to Mother. The pride that came with being Mother or Father's daughter was gone early in my adolescence.

Now, if it were possible to erase the moles from my face, raise the curve in my lip, and dye my eyes darker, I would do so at an inhuman speed.

The disdain a girl feels when told she looks like her father was something I never experienced as a child. In fact, one of the insults thrown at me that stuck as a thorn in the side stemmed from the very opposite, the offender being my brother. Issac, being just three years my senior, was the first person to throw the term "bastard" around me.

The air was thin, only experienced in the early summer of Appalachian areas. It was muddy, rainwater blanketed the thick grass. We had been sent out of the house while Michelle cleaned the baseboards of our kitchen. Usually, we were made to help, but she had grown tired of our rampant behavior.

My brothers chased after one another in the yard, while I sat in the patch of grass on a hill with my older sisters, who spoke in hushed voices, nudging each other to stop when I would turn my head to them. In retaliation, I rose to my feet, carrying myself after my brothers. My oldest brother, Dov, turned his head in my direction, ushering for the others to slow down. Begrudgingly, Issac and Oma slid to a halt while I ran over.

What had felt like ages to me had in reality only brought us up to a quarter till seven, right around the time my father would pull into the gravel driveway. The screeching brakes of a Toyota alerted Michelle that she should be summoning us to the supper table.

Sliding into their usual seats, my brothers and sisters dodged the small wooden chair that had been sloppily shoved into the corner of the table. My seat, which was the decided "Guest Chair." I prepared myself to sit but was stopped before my legs could even grace the wood.

"Issac, switch with 'er." Before my ears picked up on the protests, my eyes moved to look at my father, who was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room. His plate was set at the head of the table. As always when he got off of work, his skin was flushed a deep red from the heat, sweat donning his forehead. He smelled of sanded wood and fire.

"That's her seat" was the only argument that came to mind for Issac, who sat shoved between Oma and I. Our rules for the table were on a "first come, first serve" kind of basis, and Issac had moved me aside. Father seemed to be standing his ground on our system, looking Issac down until I heard the shifting of chairs and felt the burning eyes of my brother on me.

"Well, get up, then." Issac's words were laced with frustration.

Looking back on it now, it was a bit dramatic, but everyone in the family knew that if you were the one sitting on the "Guest Chair," you were in for a meal with creaking and scrapes on the back of your knees from the old wood.

I stood, chipped dishware in hand, allowing Issac to set his plate down. Father stepped away from us.

Issac muttered as he sat. To this day, I'm not entirely sure what was said.

My eldest sister, Eliana, had heard him, however. Her eyes narrowed as he spat the words out. Once his bottom had settled on the wood, she promptly kicked the leg of the chair. "Hey!" Issac's head whipped to her, being met with a sour face. "This thing'll fall 'part if you do that! What was that for?"

"Don't call her that." Eliana's voice was chilled to the touch. Speaking level, as she always did.

"What'd he call her?" Naomi, from her spot beside Eliana, asked. Michelle always said Naomi was too nosey for her own good, and I suppose that was true.

"Bastard. Ms. Shelley up the road calls her that when her Momma comes 'round on the weekends. Said Dad's awful lucky he was able to get Mom back after running off and having a bastard. Issac and I heard her." And I suppose Shira was too honest for her own good. She said this proudly like she had put her own research into this.

She continued when she thought Naomi had misunderstood. "Means she's not Mom and Dad's—"

"I know!" Naomi argued, picking at the carrots in front of her.

Naomi didn't know, and neither did I. I knew vaguely of the differences between me and them. They lived with Michelle and Father full time, I had to see Mother on the weekends. Ms. Shelley was Michelle's friend since grade school. Michelle and my siblings stayed with her when Father married Mother—an affair that had lasted only long enough for there to be a child as a product, then Michelle was back in Father's life, and Mother moved to the next city over.

The rest of supper was quiet, Father had assumed it was due to Issac's behavior, which was only half correct. It was my night to clear the table while the others gathered to play cards on the porch.

Scraping Oma's scraps into the trash, Michelle broke her silence.

"Bug, you're awful quiet." The sink turned on. "What's wrong?"

My initial reaction was to tattle, to tell Michelle that Ms. Shelley

had called me a rude name, but that would have been childish.

In the long run, it could've saved me some heartbreak, but in that moment I just wanted to leave that dining room.

"M alright." I smiled, and it looked just like His.

Fathers only get primary custody when the mother was real "messed up," that's what Ms. Shelley told me.

In my youth, Ms. Shelley had told us a lot of things that she certainly was not supposed to. We would be called over while Father and Michelle were working—Ms. Shelley did not work and she had no children, so it was not unnatural for her to holler for us to come up the road for a snack or juice of some sort.

Ms. Shelley had been the first person to tell me of Mother's problem.

On a spring afternoon, no later than mid-April, Oma, Naomi, and I were dropped off on the dirt road by Bus #4. Following the dragging of the tires, we were able to hear Ms. Shelley calling for us.

Ms. Shelley wasn't on her own. This time the white porch was shared with Mrs. Mabel.

Mrs. Mabel was just shy of 19, but she was already married to Daniel Doty, the youth pastor of Solid Rock. Like Naomi, she was nosey, she passed this off by saying she was keeping them in her thoughts and prayers. Eliana said she must be up all night praying if this were the case.

I felt bad for Mrs. Mabel. Most people in town said she was just a baby having babies because people told her she should be. When we arrived at the porch, Ms. Shelley smiled down at us. "Well, speak of the devil."

"Ain't a devil," Oma said, his nose turned up at her. He was trying to seem confident, but Mrs. Mabel only laughed at him.

"Not you." Her sweet eyes had moved to me. Subconsciously, I clutched the strap of my backpack. "How's your Momma, bug?"

To anyone else, this question was normal, but I knew she really wanted to ask why I hadn't been to see Mother in so long. I didn't know the correct answer, I only dug my heel into the grass.

Mrs. Mabel continued anyways. “Last we heard, she was up in Nashville with that friend o’ hers. I just don’t know how anyone’d leave a sweetheart like you, they’d be outta their mind.”

Mrs. Mabel didn’t use the words she wanted to, and she didn’t ask what she really wanted to know. She already knew the answers. This was her way of calling Mother names in more words.

Ms. Shelley raised a napkin to her lips as she laughed. “Mabel, you know she is outta her mind. Anyone would be in her state.”

“What kinda state?” I asked, and they seemed surprised. As if their conversation was mystically unheard due to my age. It was the first time I ever spoke out of turn. Oma and Naomi were silent.

“Well, you know,” Mrs. Mabel laughed, nervous. “Your Momma, she uh—”

While Mrs. Mabel attempted to beat around the bush, Ms. Shelley drove right through it with a weed whacker.

“Yer Momma drinks like a fish.” She chased the sentence with a sip of her iced tea, the lemon slapping against her teeth. Mrs. Mable giggled, giving Ms. Shelley a scolding glance, but she kept her eyes mostly on me to gauge my reaction.

I didn’t know what to say. My face was hot, my fists clenched at my sides, and my knees locked in place.

Before I could contain it, I argued, “She does not!” My voice was high and flustered. Oma and Naomi looked surprised at my outburst. Naomi attempted to tug me away, but my arm jerked from her hold. “You’re a liar.”

Ms. Shelley’s face was as sour as the lemon in her cup. “What’d you say?”

I had enough sense to keep my mouth shut this time, but the damage had already been done.

Ms. Shelley wasn’t going to take my silence as an apology. In fact, she wouldn’t take an apology at its face value.

She leaned forward, fingernail painted a nauseating hot pink. “I’d watch who I was calling a liar, if I were you, miss.” The miss was not a sign of respect or authority. It only served to put me further in my place. “Where do you think your Momma is right now?”

My silence only made her angrier, her fingernail prodding at my shoulder. “Well?”

“Nashville.” I imagine I looked like my father right then. The same look he gives when he’s dug himself so far in a situation that he can’t “I’m your father” his way out of. So, I opted to keep my answers short.

“What’s she doing?” Mrs. Mabel grinned, and at that moment I didn’t feel bad for her. Eliana was right. Mrs. Mabel only wanted to make other folks’ problems worse. I didn’t answer. “You’ll be lucky if she comes back to you, brat.” Ms. Shelley’s iced tea had begun leaving a ring around the glass, circling on the table. “Whether she drinks herself in a hole or just forgets about ‘cha, who could blame her.”

I knew my face was red, and I could feel the weight of my words in my throat, trying to fight their way up. They didn’t have the time.

“Go on.” Ms. Shelley cut her eyes at me. Oma and Naomi were more than happy to run off. I walked home with my tail between my legs.

In the fall of that year, Father had surgery on his shoulder, meaning that he couldn’t take care of me and my siblings, much less himself. My siblings were sent to stay at their Nana’s—Michelle’s mother. Whether or not Michelle asked if I could go with them, I’m not sure. If she had, Nana wouldn’t have agreed to house me, even for the few weeks of Father’s recovery. Other members of the family would deny it, but I knew of the contempt that Nana held towards me.

It was never outright. She had developed a talent for hiding how she felt about people, as most ladies of the south. Like most, though, she had her slip-ups.

During the Christmas season, Nana Bev, Eliana, and I were making our way through the waves of people in the Boaz Outlet Mall. I was only five at the time, and even then I was small for my age, Eliana kept a grip on the back of my red coat so I wouldn’t be swept away by the crowd. Nana Bev lugged around a black leather purse with a diamond cross in the middle, finding it easier to let Eliana wrangle me.

“Beverly?” Nana and Eliana stopped, and I was yanked back by my coat. I didn’t recognize the voice, only imagining that it was someone who would talk for a very long time until my blood was running cold from the chilled air.

Nana turned away completely from us to see Ms. Hannah and

smiled. Ms. Hannah lived in the nicest part of town, Pecan Acres. Ms. Hannah particularly was in one of the houses that the school bus would drive past.

Eliana, as she always did in the presence of a conversation with an adult, completely focused on them. My attention was directed away by the bright street lights above my head, only picking up on bits and pieces of the, I'm sure very interesting, conversation.

It went on for several minutes, discussing the church, Eliana's school, and the latest couple their age who was divorcing until finally, it reached its lull. Ms. Hannah now had the time to notice me.

She knelt down to where I was standing, Eliana tugging on the hood of my coat to redirect me. When I finally focused my eyes on her, Ms. Hannah smiled. Nana did not.

"Well, who's this?" She was looking at me, but I could tell the question was meant for Nana to answer. Nana did not. "One of your grandbabies?"

"She's Leanne's, not Michelle's." Nana rushed to correct her. The neckline of my coat constricted in Eliana's hand. Ms. Hannah cast her eyes at Nana momentarily, clearing her throat. It was quiet, even in the crowd, so Nana attempted to amend her shotgun reaction. "She's the baby. Year shy of Oma and Naomi."

Ms. Hannah only nodded, holding a gloved hand out to me, I shook it. She rose to her feet, dusting herself off. "Well, see y'all around." She walked away, leaving us to stand in the blanketed silence. Nana gathered herself, her shoulders settling. "Sorry 'bout that. How'd you like to get some cocoa, girls?"

Eliana tore her eyes from me, hand still grasping my hood. "Let's just go home."

It took me years to understand her shame was from embarrassing herself in front of Ms. Hannah, not for me.

As I got older, my physical traits naturally became more defined. It only drove me further away from my past role as my father's daughter.

Everything about me now was sharper, even down to the shapes of my fingernails. I looked like Mother. As you age as a girl, you begin to

analyze every physical part of you, casting into categories of “Good” and “Bad.” If you don’t, someone will do it for you.

As a mother, it was her job to tell me what was good and bad, she decided. Nothing was ever fully good, but there was plenty that was fully bad.

Every time mother complimented my appearance, there was always something I could work on.

My cheeks are full, like my father’s, but it made me look sweet. Mother gifted me an ice roller in hopes of thinning my face.

My eyes are blue, like Her’s, but they were hidden under thick glasses frames. Mother started having me wear contact lenses in the 5th grade.

My hair is thick, like Father’s, but this made it untamable. Mother began thinning my hair and giving it layers in middle school.

My lips were full, like Her’s, but I only smiled with half of my mouth. Mother began making me smile with my teeth fully on display, but even then, there was something to tear apart like a vulture.

I look at myself now in the mirror and I am faced with a grotesque mixture. Things I don’t want to be. Things Mother scorns me for in the backhanded talent only women possess. Things my father takes a pause to look at when speaking to me. Things I was forced to do to look less like Father or Mother.

But you can’t change yourself. Not entirely.

Somewhere, deep within my flesh, I was still the little girl with dark brown hair. I still wore the clunky glasses that made it difficult to see the thick eyebrows that adorned me. I didn’t wear makeup to cover the moles or freckles. I never pierced the left side of my nose to hide its shape. I never overlined my lips to hide the cupid’s bow.

Unfortunately, she was so far within me, I would likely never see her again.

You can’t change how your eyes that you stole from Her widen with your expressions.

Your lips that are shaped exactly like His press thinly together in agitation are similar to that of a tattoo.

You can't alter your voice, no matter how much you try to pitch it down.

You're always going to howl out a laugh.

Those are all Their's. It may be the only thing they share, though unwillingly. None of it's yours, it never will be.

Nothing I see in the mirror now is my own. I'm not my own. I'm only a blended concoction of the things They hate most about the other, making Them hate me in turn.

You never hear it outright. In all the years, you never hear them say the five words you'd wish they'd just spit out. Others will. Mrs. Dott will. Ms. Shelley will. Mrs. Mabel, Mrs. Hannah, the woman who cuts your hair, your brother's Little League coach, your distant relatives. Never Them.

Mother may slap your wrist, tell you to "Fix your face," ponder out loud how you got such wide hips, advise you don't smile with your teeth.

Father will demand you hush when you start to raise your voice, mutter under his breath that he preferred your natural hair, tease you for your short legs, order you to wipe the lipstick off your mouth.

Neither of Them will take the time to tell you why they want you to change. You'll never know why it is so important to them that you put the effort into being someone else's daughter.

As I think this now, it has occurred to me that all the efforts made to further myself has made me my own.

My eyebrows are still dark. Still thick. But my left brow is scarred from a mistake made with a razor. Not exactly like His.

My hair is brown. Thick and waves out at the end. But the front is bleached blonde. Mother's is black. Father's was brown.

My shoulders are stiff, like Father's, but rise up when I laugh, where His stay stagnant.

My lips are pink, curving sharply into the bow. I don't overline them. I make no attempt to look like Mother.

As I examine myself now, there is a weight lifted off of me. If everyone wants you to be something you're not, eventually you'll create

your own Frankenstein's Monster. You'll take the small parts of Mother, Father, Brother, Sister, Nana, or Michelle and make it your own.

“Proud of every cell and atom that make up
your being like a jigsaw puzzle with perfect
cookie-cutter edges.”

—J’Auna Demming

Honorable Mention

POETRY

A Cacophony of Beautiful Symphonies

By J'Āuna Demming

Herschel V. Jenkins High School

sometimes I wonder what it's like to know who you truly are,
to live in colors and dreams of your own,
proud of every cell and atom that make up your being like a jigsaw
puzzle with perfect cookie-cutter edges,
never once questioning if your existence is merely imitating who you
were supposed to be,
I stare at my reflection longer than i should,
dissecting my features and questioning if i live in contradictions,
the bathroom light flickers as i disappear,
a reminder of the dark truth etched into my bones and carved
into my soul,

(I am lost magic.)

who I was supposed to be lies in the cotton fields where the cicadas
fly home for the season,
and the oak trees only know the smell of burning flesh,

the spirits sing their slave songs rising out of the Alabama clay
and dirt,
hoping to find their way back to a place buried in their emptiness,
i listen as they rejoice in their prayers to an unknown god,
and if it's enough,
I cry.

my culture lurks as a dark cloud of shame that hides my misery,
i live in complexities trying to navigate this body i claim to be my own,
and try to remember the things my colorful people have created,
i inhale unbalanced vowels and answer in what my mouth makes
of constellations,
painting a picture that will one day lead me home,
where melanin-rich folks perform forgotten dances to the beat of the
drums in tune with their
stomping feet,
hoping it's enough for those who are still lost,
for a moment i feel like discovered treasure,
and i am reborn.

my mother speaks in slang and blues of her home, never forgetting
the place where grandma's rocking chair sits on the porch,
and crickets sing in darkness among the tall grass,
her words cascade down her lips and flow into my ears,
she cries dried rivers,

but yet,
I drown myself,
I inhale unbalanced vowels and answer in bursts of colors,
pink, blue, green
her laughter rings of broken chords,
sometimes i wonder if i'm a walking contradiction,
I speak in movement more than tongues,
while listening to the music of stomping feet that cleanses my soul,
and try to perform the dances my colorful people have created,
for a moment i hear a sound that feels like home,
and i am complete.

one day, my father tells me stories of the life he will leave behind
he speaks more in tongues to preserve the memories he won't let
himself forget,
I listen, more so to compensate for the space between who he wants
me to be and who i believe
myself to be
his eyes tell of the days in his camouflage uniform and the long
nights away from home,
he teaches me how to believe in the impossible and find soul in
the empty,
I crawl into my five year old body and run to his outstretched arms,
for a moment i am lifted into the air,
and soar beyond his expectations.

I find solace in knowing i am a creation wrapped in my own colors,
not red cheeks or white skin or blue eyes,

I am a kaleidoscope of browns and pinks and greens and purples and
yellows and oranges,

I speak in what I believe love is as I tell the stories of those before me,
stories of more than pain and hate and death and suffering,
reminding myself with every word,

every breath,

every laugh,

you are not a fake.

sometimes I imagine myself wading in the water,

the night sky shimmers in the glassy ripples,

I lean down, cupping them in my palms

and admire how the stars glitter in my hands,

for a moment i know who i truly am,

and allow myself to smile once more.

“The grain on the wood formed gold veins that pulsed with energy and the entire shelf shifted from its place, reorienting itself behind her.”

—Abigail Kabagambe

Honorable Mention

FICTION & DRAMA

The Glass Library

By Abigail Kabagambe

Franklin High School

“Despite all the capabilities of magic there are certain things it can never do.”

The words of her teacher’s lesson that day echoed through Alice’s mind as she wandered the halls of the abandoned dormitory, guided solely by the thrum of white hot energy reverberating through the key on her chest. She had long since removed her shoes and resorted to treading in her socks, lest the clack of her uniform oxfords on the hard floors alert the Dorm Mothers of her presence in the building so long after curfew.

The building had been abandoned for years, and its true origins had long since been lost to time. No one knew exactly why or when it closed to students, nor why it hadn’t been destroyed and replaced after so long. It loomed in the West Lot, casting its hollow gaze on the rest of the campus like an omnipresent force of unidentified malice. Naturally, a slew of rumours surrounded the place and its nature, some saying that it was simply an abandoned renovation project and others that it was closed down when several residents went missing in their sleep. Regardless, the fact remained that the dormitory was a point of curiosity at Polaris Academy, and despite the Headmistress’ best efforts, it had become something of a tradition for new students to venture into its degrading walls, stay the night, and explore what they could as a “test of courage” of sorts to prove themselves to their upperclassmen.

Alice desired no part in the matter. Years of working in her grandfather’s apothecary had garnered in her an acute respect for the effects of magical residue on objects. Whether her classmates realized it or

not, the entirety of the building, from its shaky foundation to its decrepit walls, was tainted with the discontented residual energy of the magical children that used to inhabit it. Less so than the other buildings on campus, sure, but enough to make her experienced eyes guide her clear of it whenever possible. Unfortunately, her Alchemy class was behind the dormitory on the other end of the West Lot, and the only path to get there ran right beside the building.

She continued walking through the corridors, wincing as the cracked tiles groaned under her weight. Makes sense, she thought. They've only had to carry ghosts for a while now. She chuckled nervously under her breath. Truthfully, Alice had no intention in coming here in the first place. But, every day since she'd arrived on campus, she'd felt the key on her necklace grow warm as she passed the building on her way to class. It was faint at first, hardly noticeable save for the warm patch it would leave on her uniform jumper. But over time the reaction had grown stronger and the key had begun to buzz with vigor even when she was far from the old dormitory. When it roused her from her sleep that night she'd had enough. Pulling on her jumper and winter skirt, she stepped into the cold air and crept through the school, guided by the shifting strength of the humming in the key and eventually ending up at the old dorm.

The key suddenly lifted off her chest and jettied towards a side door with an ornately carved knob that mirrored those of other doors on campus. The only difference was that where those knobs shone gold with great pride, this one could only manage a sickly yellow colour that seemed to reflect the rest of the building—degraded and foreboding, with an undertouch of dignity. Despite her wiser instincts telling her otherwise, Alice steeled herself and twisted the knob. The hinges let out a loud complaint that ricocheted off each surface in the hall before coming to rest in the night air. A stronger jolt of nerves ran through her, but her curiosity took precedence and she pressed onwards.

The space in front of her was pitch black. Cupping her hands in a sphere, she focused and formed several bubble-like lights in the space between her palms. They lifted towards the ceiling, illuminating the room and bathing it in a gentle, yellow light made slightly ominous by the crisp winter air. The space behind the door was small and housed only a few items: some yellowing, scribbled paper on the floor,

a blue, moth-eaten jumper, likely part of a student's backup uniform, and two sparse, wooden bookcases containing only a few volumes each. To Alice's eyes, there was nothing of interest there, but the key had come alive, pulling harder than ever towards the wall behind one of the shelves and pulsing with energy like a thundering heartbeat.

Alice examined the shelf more closely. Upon further inspection, she noticed a small switch lodged in the gap between the side and back panels. She pressed it.

Suddenly, the bookshelf lit up. The grain on the wood formed gold veins that pulsed with energy and the entire shelf shifted from its place, reorienting itself behind her. The wall in front of her wavered and emanated a bright light that seemed to reach out for her as she covered her eyes.

When she opened them, the key had gone limp on her chest and she found herself in a massive library. The white stone walls were decorated with delicate portraits encased in ornate gold frames, each depicting scenes of old glory that seemed to watch her every move. Grand bookshelves extended far out on her left side, stuffed to the brim with rows and rows of multicolored texts. She could tell at a glance that they were quite old, and positively steeped with ancient magic.

The wall in front of her encased a massive bay window tinted blue by moonlight and covered with swirls of delicate metalwork. Below the glass (*Can it be called glass?* she wondered), a boy roughly her age perched on a cushioned loveseat reading a weathered green book. The filtered light rendered him almost translucent, making his pale skin seem almost ghostly. To her right, an old woman sat writing at a grand mahogany desk stained with dried spots of ink. Gold inkwells and curled feather quills dotted the surface littered with old books and pieces of parchment covered in half-finished symbols and scratchy writing. The woman's pen stilled. Both figures turned to look at her.

"Uhm, hello?" Alice spoke carefully. The boy glared at her.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?" he interrogated.

"Henry, hush. You'll frighten her." The old lady turned to smile at her, crows feet winking in the corners of her eyes. "Hello child. Are you alright?"

"I'm quite alright, thank you," Alice responded. "What is this place?"

"Oh, just some old stacks. Nothing to trouble over, really. Are you lost? It's rather late for someone your age to be out and about."

"I suppose so. But this key—" Upon being named, it lifted, shining gold as it had before. Only this time, the book in the boy's hands rose with it, its green binding vanishing to display a blue and silver tome swirled with silver filigree and firmly latched on one side. A complex net of moving clockwork accompanied by two clock faces was set in its cover. From Alice's position, it was impossible to read the exact time, but the direction of the hands was different on each face. The sound of ambient ticking filled the room and the shifting of gears could be heard emanating from deep within some impossible space inside the book's cover. The three fell silent, astonished.

The boy, *Henry*, she gathered, flicked his eyes between the book and her.

"How did you do that?" he whispered in disbelief. "I've been trying to crack that seal for ages and it's never budged . . ." He grew angry and took a few steps forward. "Tell me how you did that!"

"Henry!" the woman shouted. He quickly fell silent. Interesting. The woman regained her composure.

"Well that was rather, eh, exciting," she spoke carefully. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine. Could one of you explain what's going on? What's happening to my key? Why did it react with that book? Who are you people and where are we?" Alice raised her voice in frustration.

"Ancient magic, my dear. It reacts with things on a whim. Nothing anyone of your age should have to worry about. Now, how did you happen across that key?" the woman asked, leaning forward.

"That's none of your business. What *is* my business is learning why I was led here in the first place."

The woman pursed her lips. "Very well. Let's all calm down first, then we can chat. Could I make you a cup of tea?" The woman leaned over to rummage through one of the drawers in her desk. Out of the corner of her eye, Alice caught Henry taking a small step backwards.

"No, thank you. Now if you would please—" Suddenly, a large

circular glyph formed on the floor beneath Alice's feet, locking her into place. The room wavered and she felt herself tip as the floor softened under her. With a shout of surprise, she stumbled backwards, reaching for Henry's arm only to be shocked when her hand passed right through him. He reached for the key on her neck, but she snatched it away and held it close to her chest. As she fell faster and deeper through the floor and her teacher's words echoed through her mind once again.

Despite all the capabilities of magic, there are some things it can never do.

One, it may never usurp the unnatural. Magic is nature; it cannot act outside its own composition.

Two, it may never create from nothing. Magic is, at its root, conversion, not creation.

And three, under no circumstances can magic ever be used to revive the dead.

“It rings in your head like the cicadas on
that hot July day.”

—Halle Saldivia

Honorable Mention

SPOKEN WORD

Gringa

By Halle Saldivia

Osceola County School for the Arts

You first heard the word when you were ten

You didn't realize that word was now you

The July air was hot

The cicadas's song crying in your ears

Fat waves of scorching heat clinging to you

In the same way the dirt clung to your sweat coated skin

Your mamá just asked you to tell your tío that the meat was ready

You scrambled to tell him, eager to get a bite of the sizzling steak on the grill before your sister

You told him in English, feet turning to get back

But stopped at his laughing

¿Qué es esto? Habla español, gringa.

You didn't understand what *gringa* meant

Maybe you should have

If you did, you wouldn't be called that

Now, the word would be uttered at parties when the music was loud and laughter even louder

It would be heard at get togethers

When the empanadas and tequeños were cheesy and hot to
the touch

It would grab your attention in the kitchen

When your mother asked you to wash the dishes and fold the laundry

You wouldn't be having this problem if you were in Venezuela

But you're in America

Where playing soccer in the neighborhood street doesn't have the risk
of glass

Being embedded into skin

Or having gunshots

As your lullaby to go to sleep

Instead

You have a warm bed

Food on the table

And more opportunities than your parents ever had

But in what you have gained as an American

You lost part of yourself as a Venezuelan

And in turn, gained the nickname, *Gringa*

You've become a foreigner in your own culture

And you would think

In the land of red, white, and blue of which you're born in

You would fit in

Like a part of a jigsaw made of American Dreams and
Manifest Destinies

But in the land of milk and honey

Your skin is a touch too dark

Your hair is a tad curlier than normal

And your food a little bit strange
For years, you would submit your natural curls into straight lines
The words mamá and papá were replaced by “mom” and “dad”
You would ask your mom to give you a peanut butter and jelly sandwich
Instead of the meat, sweet plantain, rice, and teeth-snapping crisp
black beans of a *pabellón*

You are suspended between two worlds
Teetering on the hyphenated line
Between Latino and American
When you are called this word
One half will say,
¿Ay, eres uno de esos niños?
The other half will ask,
What does that mean?

The title clings to your back like a leech
Pulling out any ounce of pride you have as a Latina
It rings in your head like the cicadas on that hot July day
A cacophony cry of what you are and what you're not

“Books like this are needed in the world, books that can open the youth’s eyes to issues that are plaguing our society and create solutions.”

—Morgan Shirley

Honorable Mention

BOOK BANS PROMPT

The Support of Book Banning is the Support of Ignorance

By *Morgan Shirley*

Hinsdale Central High School

“Black teens are reported missing—and far too few people notice” is the title of a *Washington Post* article. Few is an understatement; I remember a day in 2017 where four teenage girls from my hometown of Washington, D.C. went missing in less than 24 hours. Have these young women ever been found? I still don’t have an answer to that question. March, 2014, an 8-year-old African American female by the name of Relisha Rudd went missing from Washington, D.C. To this day the public remains with no answers to what has happened to this kidnapped child and where she is today. Disappearances of young women in my community of African Americans happen entirely too often. Is this because the culprits know that they’ll get away with it, because no one will investigate the disappearance of their victims?

I remember being in the 7th grade and overhearing my science and English teacher talking about a book. A book that details a teenager, a black teenager, going missing with no one looking for her. At this time, I had a very strong love for mystery novels. So, as a naturally curious early teen at the age of 13, I went and ordered *Monday’s Not Coming*, by Tiffany D. Jackson from an online bookstore. Once the book came in the mail, I read it and was immediately intrigued that an African American female teenager, just like me, had gone missing but no one seemed to notice. The main character Claudia is best friends with a girl by the name of Monday Charles. One week Claudia noticed that her best friend did not attend the second week of school. Claudia realizes that her best friend is

missing, so she looks to Monday's mother and sister for an answer. Monday's family members aren't cooperative and seem to not care about her disappearance. Throughout the novel Claudia examines the question of how can a teenage girl just vanish without anyone noticing that she's gone? The characters were African American females, so in addition to the novel being my favorite genre it included representation. The main characters were African Americans, and their roles were not to be maids, slaves, or degrading roles. My younger self was intrigued by the book due to suspension and representation, the two ideals that have pushed me into the life of law and advocacy. Of course, I understood what the book was about, but it was not until recently where I truly related and understood this novel.

Now today every time I see a missing poster for a Black teenager in my neighborhood, I am reminded of this novel. No one ever seems to find the missing children, instead their cases fade away as yet another Black teen goes missing. Seeing this horrid trend is what inspired me to be a criminal attorney. My passion for cases like this is why I attend weekly youth safety and justice council meetings at my local attorney general's office. This book opened my eyes to the injustices that are done right in my backyard and that it is my duty to solve them. This is why I am now pursuing a career in the law field. Tiffany D. Jackson changed my life for the better by introducing me to a topic that will now be my career.

Books like this are needed in the world, books that can open the youth's eyes to issues that are plaguing our society and create solutions. However, *Monday's Not Coming*, by Tiffany D. Jackson has been challenged in Virginia and Texas and removed from some school libraries in Utah. In Loudoun County School (a county near my home of Washington, D.C.) parents organized to have the book banned due to its intense discussions about racism, justice, and poverty. But these intense discussions need to be had to end many of today's problems. By banning this book parents and officials are directly contributing to their children's ignorance of major issues. Jackson's book has been wrongfully banned and every day that it remains banned is another day that someone remains blind or turns a blind eye to the discrimination against African Americans. Therefore we must come together to stop the banning of books, specifically books that have been wrongfully banned.

“The sunlight spilled onto his textured skin,
onto his pale hand holding mine.”

—Rubie Lombardi

Honorable Mention

PERSONAL ESSAY/MEMOIR

To Love and to Lose

By Rubie Lombardi

Nonnewaug High School

Part I: First Love

I misheard what became my favorite lyric. It doesn't make sense looking back—"candy belief" does not fit quite right in the sentence—but it was an idea that I completely understood.

"Hold on tight to the candy belief."

It was the sweetest idea I could imagine; a saccharine thing, like the little candy shop we visited, the one that he had gone to since he was a child. Never visiting without buying a bag of multicolored candy lego blocks.

I had never been to Block Island before he invited me there. It was a kind of location I adored; the shaded brick streets and two-story buildings offered a unique haven from the rest of society, complete with a moat of the Atlantic. The swift ability to trade a bustling atmosphere with the quiet of an uncharted beach within minutes was one I had never had the privilege of experiencing before. The whole trip was something of a first to me, especially experiencing it with a boy I was truly falling for.

It was the first week of July: ten days until my seventeenth birthday. There was no better place to spend this time, surrounded by salty scents in perfect warmth the afternoon we arrived. The sunlight spilled onto his textured skin, onto his pale hand holding mine. There was a certain *je ne sais quoi* about him that was impossible to articulate, and that I was defenseless in the face of.

"Hold on tight to the candy belief." And I did. Through the sunlit beach days, the sunscreen over usage, the searches for hidden crabs in the chilled, rock-covered sand. I held onto the belief as I held his hair back late at night, after one too many candy legos mixed poorly with something else. As we watched TV, his arms were wrapped tight around me. His opalescent eyes closed soundlessly, peacefully, hiding my favorite shades of cornflower blue. As blue as the sea we ran knee-deep in, before he swept me up in an embrace. As soft as snow and twice as nonchalant. It was something unwanting, unforgiving, freezing.

Seasickness overcame me beneath the benches of the ferry that took me home from that place. Listening to my old favorite songs, I felt the same feeling as when I realized that I was in love with him, and I could tell that he didn't feel the same. It was a sinking feeling, a plummeting dagger of disastrous despair. With the ringing in my ears, I couldn't tell what was real. What was the music and what was the silence. What I said last night and what I should have kept secret. The love I didn't speak, and the love he didn't convey.

The knowledge that he was never really mine, and I've never wanted anything more.

I guess I don't always hear the right thing. It's why I misheard those lyrics. It's why I heard "I love you" in his kiss. It's why I thought he was more than a candy belief that I sugarcoated the idea of, ever since I first encountered him. I chose him thinking he could be sweet, but he gave me the most venomous tastes I've known. Why was I convinced he could save my loneliness in the snow, when all he did was worsen the storm?

Just as I watched him walk in front of me to the candy shop, I trail behind as he helps me with my bags. It is in moments like this that I recall the irrevocable horror of reality: that an idea is just that. Even one honeyed is just a wretched concept. Block Island's moat is one I will never cross again; cobalt is a color that I fear I might never escape in my peripheral vision.

My seventeenth birthday passed, a day spent in waiting, and he did not send me a message.

Snow turns to sadness, and I have never been less prepared.

Part II: Sasha

“You know,” my friend whispered, interrupting the tranquility of the trees’ sweeping sounds in between birdsongs. Her short brown hair had fallen from a delicate red bow holding it away from her face, now covering her eye. She beckoned me closer to her, and I obliged. I waited impatiently for the secret and watched her eyes dart around us, ensuring no unintended listeners. “Sasha isn’t my real name.”

There was a time when I didn’t yet consider existentialism or madness or heartbreak; when I did not know the trials of femininity or how to apply eyeliner. This was the time I knew Sasha.

Sasha was an old soul. I can recall her rounded features; her small, pointed nose was one that could have been mistaken for a semi-fictionalized feature of an impressionistic portrait. There was something timeless and fairy-like about her subtlety and the way she carried herself, always sounding so much more mature than the others. She stood a few inches taller than me as we spoke then.

Sasha and I clicked as soon as we met. On that summer camp farm, we shared a quaint enjoyment for petting the quiet young bunnies and sitting underneath shady trees on rustic old benches, and enjoyed the created camp atmosphere with our peers. Still, something separated us from the noise and disorder of the other campers—we found much solace in undiscovered corners that the fields had to offer, and in each other’s company. It was the kind of sparkling childhood companionship that is near impossible to come by again. Where you can speak about something for hours and not even know each other’s last names. When two children can completely skip trivial knowledge and questions and fully click—that is what I held that summer. We thought we were above it all.

Sasha had a sister called Jade. She was two or three years younger than us, and Sasha wanted as much space as she could possibly get from her. This farm was her haven and Jade an intruder. But I encouraged her to stay, and the three of us spent hours making painted rocks or friendship bracelets until we got bored or Jade went back to her friends. Sasha seemed to carry a weight that Jade was free of—I thought there couldn’t have been many reasons why Sasha was light-years more mature, and the only solid answer was that she held

the burden of knowledge. From the paranoid and neurotic attitude of her mother and the pill bottles uncovered from bathroom cabinets, I often theorized that Sasha and her family were running from something.

“Sasha isn’t my real name.”

Her brown doe eyes looked at me with such insurmountable and indescribable trust. A thousand questions flooded my mind—all left unanswered to this day. Why me? How can I help you escape? One day, would you run away with me and we can raise fluffy cows forever?

“What’s your real name?”

She never told me.

I knew nothing more of Sasha after that summer. I do not know where she is, what fate has held for her, or her true name. All I know is that she moved away, and I will never see her again. I wonder how much else of Sasha’s life was fabricated, and what lengths she went to keep secrets. But how capable is a ten-year-old girl of lying to such an extent? Could I have done more?

There were other summer friends after Sasha. Max goes to college in Connecticut. Nina goes by Nix now, and keeps her hair cut short. Kira moved to Florida but still spends her summers around here. They all cut ties with Jason after he did something unforgivable a few years ago. I know all of their states and all of their last names. I have seen their prom photographs and how they’ve grown; but not Sasha. She is immortalized as the girl who will never grow up in my mind, a pure, otherworldly influence and mystery who will stay with me throughout my life. Our youth defined us: enabling us to bond absolutely, but making us lose each other in the end just as fast. Leaving me to wonder if she thinks about me, too.

Part III: In Dreams

Why do I love him, I ask myself? The answer is simple: he understands when I talk about the way colors mix into each other when I stare at the ground for too long. He sees the world the way I see it: a place where life-altering mistakes are so constantly made, but leaves

will always grow back and confetti will certainly fall again. I look in his eyes and I fall into the chromatic world I want to live in.

And then I wake, and it is all gone. Dawn reminds me that he never understood a thing I said, never saw the world as abstractly as I do. Never proclaimed love and meant it. I resume my place in the world where I haven't spoken to him since September and he actively avoids my gaze.

The summer of last year was when I first started having vivid, ultraviolet dreams again. I used to have them often when I was younger, but they gradually faded, as most things do. The pivotal event that reintroduced my dreams again is one I do not know. One night my sleep was void and uninterrupted, and the next was kaleidoscopic. It was a welcome change at first; despite lethargy, waking with technicolor memories was refreshing in itself. Dreams are, thus far, unexplained—random neural firing, a step to self-actualization, or a glimpse into unconscious Freudian desires?—and I got to experience them again for myself to decide which erudite dream theory was the most likely.

I used to believe wholeheartedly that all of the day's thoughts were processed in the subconscious under the blanket of the night—this was the most logical theory, in my humble, childish opinion.

Now, things are different. It doesn't matter how much I think or don't think of him in the daytime—the boy I used to love continues to see me every other night in my dreams: in my passenger seat, in my arms, in my head. Memories of dragging him to the dance floor, duets in his car, afternoons spent lounging in front of TVs. It's been over two months since he left me and there hasn't been a week I haven't dreamt of him. Even if I had a great, happy day, my dreams won't let him go.

Memories and dreams that can't move on pull me in every direction, leaving me motionless. It levitates my body and keeps it frozen in May, frozen in July, as autumn passes me by. I wake crestfallen, reminded of how much I used to love and the desolation that remains.

The silence is forlorn. I am a dance of blue petals plummeting towards concrete, remnants of a flower that was once so beautifully promising. He loved me once, and now he loves me not.

It's mornings like this when I take notes of the cracks in the crystalized glass that is my mind. My dreams don't allow me to find happiness in the present or hope in the future; I am instead chained to the past, and to my memories, and I belong to what I should have done. I spend my mornings in mourning for what could have been; it has gradually become routine even against my greatest will.

These dreams make me realize that I carry more than enough guilt for the both of us. In the daylight, I hope he's haunted by my songs, by my presence, by my successes, as I am cursed by him whenever I rescind into the night. I hope he can find solace in his loneliness because I know he will be there for a long, long time.

One day I will dream of someone who loves me. One day my liveliness will return to me fully and mend this heart, mend my subconscious, mend these dreams. One day the clock will strike midnight and I will sleep soundly, when peace is no stranger, and he is a stranger instead. I will forget him, and he will forget me not.

Part IV: Seventeen

A black star is thought to be an alternative to a black hole. Some theorize that it is the stage in between a collapsing star and a "singularity," in which the fabric of spacetime continuum is viciously ripped apart at the seams and brings about ultimate disaster and total reconstruction.

During the first act of my seventeenth year was when I rediscovered true loneliness. I was spectating then, providing empty commentary on the significant days that did not wait for me to catch up.

This feeling was not foreign. It came and went like the whispers of spring that bloomed around me, dropping and reappearing like faes. By then, I knew the characteristics of it; a tall, soft-spoken entity who acted as a shadow might, following me everywhere the light touched until the blanket of night could hide me away. In most stories, the light acts as a haven, but never in mine. Even in the brightest of places, with the babbles of conversation and happiness surrounding me, I felt its presence. Light always casts a shadow.

I could never have predicted what would unfold during that time;

one of great change and unpredictability. My emotions could not be forecasted, and I could only hope at any time that I would not return to how I felt a few Januarys ago. Summer was finally winding down and my days of intended relaxation were limited, sending me fearfully back to consider how things would be. I had to resume thinking about college and creating and focusing on staying whole. I would not let myself wither away into the obsolescence of forgottenness. Now I am to reap the benefits of how hard I've worked these past few years: senior year is the time of recognition, excitement. I can watch it all finally pay off in award shows, reflected in my grades, and in the positive (albeit dubious) ways people look at me. Despite it all, people don't feel close to me—I can't get past the pedestals, and I am isolated on the moon until another spaceman can join me. They don't know how cold it is to wait.

Last year during free time, a few of us sat in a circle and played digital poker. I was on a winning streak, sweeping up chips from underneath like a whirlpool. It was my first time playing.

"How are you doing this?" a boy asked me.

"I don't know." I laughed in response. "I think it's just beginner's luck."

"No," he said firmly, "luck like that doesn't go away."

I was taken aback for a moment. It reminded me of the summer I turned sixteen, when I began collecting clovers. I found a four-leaf shortly after my birthday, and I was entranced by the idea of being lucky. I let it dry out and kept it anyway, but I missed the vivaciousness of its life. I fell in love with it and I never found another. Was the lack of four-leaves a result of not enough hard work, or not enough luck? When did the luck begin, and shouldn't it inevitably stop?

When will I lose it—have I already?

People look at me fondly, but I haven't been invited to a birthday party in years. Once bright green clovers evade me now like those who fear God, leaving me with nothing but the crisp brown fragments of what life used to look like. The shadow of loneliness is perhaps what underscores all of my thoughts, all of my successes (poker and all). "A friend to all is a friend to none," they say, and they are right. To win prize books and to have no peers to read them to. To be the poet and never the muse. To be the one watering dead flowers. To be listened to

but not heard; in this, all my exhausted efforts become nothing more than murmurs of deflated black stars.

Perhaps this loneliness is my singularity—my absolute destruction and subsequent reinvention. This recognizable luck will shape my transformation and guide me to where I need to go. Walking alone will take me to a place where Friday nights are scheduled and relationships are fulfilling. Where I am understood. Seventeen doesn't last forever—neither does a black star. Spring will bring about new beginnings, and daylight will no longer chase me away. I will be loved as much as I love.

Part V: . . . Better than Never to Love at All

I used to believe that my problem is that I fall in love too easily and fall too hard.

I knew a boy in the spring only for him to leave me in autumn, and I will never think of anyone else when I see a red Jeep. Holidays pass me by and remind me of how things used to be, when I was vibrantly young and tiny—before the ghost stories and the ghosts of my friends echoed around me. I still look for clovers whenever my bare feet lead me to green patches when it's warm. Dreams paint tapestries of color and nostalgia each night, reminding me of it all, but the misunderstanding self-alienation of the daytime is worse.

But the overarching message that defines everything is that *these losses are not that at all*.

I drive in my car and the music I listen to is like heartbreak in F major, but it won't always sound this way. When I look up at the dark blue sky, I won't always see apparitions of my past. I remind myself that each pair of headlights among the millions in the world is a person driving away from something, in one way or another. This midnight road serves as a reminder that I am but one star in a system, constellation, galaxy, universe. These fellow stars will anchor me back, tell me that I am only a seventeen-year-old girl, and relight my eyes. I am still in orbit, and we are all still gravitating towards each other. Every moment is mine to make. The future is in my decorating hands.

The stars tell me to be honest, so I will tell them I love them as soon

as I feel it. I never want to shame my love in this world and in my heart, because that's how I will find the people that are right for me. I would tell him I love him a thousand times over if he left me every single time, and I would not regret it. Because I did. I do. I refuse to let a fear of love define me, bleed into my pure color. This hideous drop of blue will not taint my perfect yellow because I will not let it.

He could never forget the girl he thought was some mystical vampire, who takes her shoes off at movie theaters, who took him to see his favorite musician. The girl with the rings, who writes, who has so much love to give. The girl who he did not accept in the end, and the girl who can bounce back and reinvent herself.

The girl who can reign the chaos of her melancholy and move on.

Falling in love is not a crime or a thing that demands control. It is the opposite of a problem—it represents humanity, freedom, joyfulness.

I am full of love. That is a whimsical, bejeweled, striking thing to know. My unflinching love is, and will continue to be, my power.

“A rising crescendo of horror as I locked myself in the bathroom.”

—Jessica Li

Honorable Mention

FICTION & DRAMA

The Vanishing Point

By Jessica Li

American High School

You began when Mom installed the trifold mirror in the corner of the room. It stood at a meter and a half, blush-colored, with twin gold clasps that snapped together like a jewelry box, or a diary. I looked inside, and by that I mean I tilted the glass wings until the reflections bounced against each other into infinity. When I stuck my head between the panes, a geometric chimera of me was born, one with three shining foreheads, three scrunched-up noses, three dark pursed lips.

This is nice, Mom cooed. My little girl with her own mirror. You can run a fashion show in here. Where are the clothes Mommy bought you?

Afterward, I stood alone in the center of the carpet, imagining the stained fiber beneath my toes lit in a spotlight. The white dress with its uncut tag dug into my shoulder blades. The cheap glitter scattered everywhere, showing up on my skin like winking stars. Buried, I began to cry. Silently, in great rolling sobs, so that Mom would not hear through the wall.

Just take it off, you said. If you don't feel good, take it off.

Some phantom limb guided the dress to the ground until I stood, bared and shaken, in only a tank top before the mirror. A hand that was not mine rested lightly on my head. Two furrowed brows, two set chins, two pairs of eyes shone in the glass.

I told you that if I didn't wear it, Mom would be sad again.

That doesn't matter, you said, combing through the dark stalks of my hair with your fingers. You continued: She didn't cut the tag. You

can return anything if you have the tag and you haven't damaged the good. Then the lady at the mall will put the clothes that could have been yours back onto the rack so that other boys and girls can try them on and see if they like them better. Do you get it now? So do you feel damaged?

A knock. Mom's shadow darkened the slit beneath the door. Were you talking to me?

* * *

It began with red. A rising crescendo of horror as I locked myself in the bathroom. Then Mom's beaming smile, the first in many weeks. *Don't be scared. This is natural. This is normal. My little girl is a woman now!*

Disgust. It was a feeling that pulsed outward but could never spread to my face. The word woman which had previously held a soft, sweet shape in my mouth now oozed bitter pus when forced upon me now. I could not be a woman—I did not want this shape forever—I had to be a woman because some unspeaking anatomy within me decided it was time. A betrayal from someplace inside.

In health class, we learned more words: menstruation is a monthly process by which the *female body* sheds blood and tissue from the *uterus* lining to indicate a readiness for *pregnancy*. (In a consoling voice) this is nature's way of reminding you to have a *baby*. The nutrients are all for the baby, and until you have a baby, you will continue to **bleed**.

A terrible, vulnerable, violent word. **Bleed**. I did not need a baby; I needed me. The child I was yesterday, whole. I wrapped my arms around my gut and turned to face the wall. **Bleed**. I did not want the flailing, convulsing thing within me, waiting for a baby that won't come. A **wound** of expectation, never to be sown.

* * *

I looked away at the first flash of pink as the Victoria's Secret poster emerged within view. This was the section of the mall where shoelaces

suddenly became interesting and you would laugh, knowing something you would not reveal.

Mom led me inside the shop. It was instantly an onslaught of half-bare mannequins glowing dully beneath the ambient lights, coquettish perfume lingering after a clerk has walked away, articles that should have been kept close, kept hidden, but hung limply from the racks instead.

I sat on the benches with the husbands, uninterested in white, nude, rims, or ABCs. Mom noticed—her face morphed into that of Coach Zamora, who lined us up around the locker room on the first day to deliver her yearly pep talk, practiced in its universality.

What are you embarrassed for? We're all women in here.

Were we truly? I locked myself in the changing stalls with Mom's selections, intending to never come out again. You were quiet for once, and you were the evidence I needed that possibly I would never find this right. I would not be my mom, packing lingerie in clear shopping bags, or my friends who cut the bathroom line to pass each other tampons under the stall doors. It was a calculated display of the uncomfortable that dared everyone to do the same. But, like undressing in someone else's body, the ownership of shame that did not feel mine to claim.

* * *

Love. L-O-V-E. I traced the word with my finger at the bottom of the card, clumsily in cursive next to *Mom*. Above it was a sharply printed line of text: *To the most special girl in the world, the happiest of birthdays*. Between it was nothing, a blank white sea.

"I love you," I said to you.

Thank you. But why not now?

"What?"

Why don't you love us now?

Once, Mom had insisted on visiting the beach. I had never learned to swim, so I laid across the glittering sand and gently unmoored myself with the balls of my feet. When I flipped myself under the

surface, I could see, beyond the rippling ankles and bathing trunks, a deep blue mass that light could not reach. If I crawled crab-like along the ocean floor, I would reach the blackest part of the primordiality and curl myself to sleep, a quiet return to nature's womb.

But that saline amniotic fluid was not for people to breathe. We choked and drowned in the waters of our birth, no love left on our tongues. My lungs begging for air, I pushed with my toes and slid back to shore. Breaking the surface was an act of surrender—to be washed out, spat out. I blinked away salt tears. Maybe your question was not meant to be rhetorical. There was vaguely a relationship between feeling unwanted and not loving the person that was me, then-you. It was second nature to harbor that care like a mother to a growing fetus, but just as the sea rejected its abbranchious spawn, there must have been an evolution, an uncontrollable coming-of-age in uncertainty and shame that ferried us away from the most simple regard of ourself.

Happy birthday.

All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. Oscar Wilde had reached with self-assured fingers a century into the future to hold me singularly by the throat.

I did not want to become my mother. Defiance was in the **stark black lines** drawn beneath my lashes when Mom had never worn make-up because *how could you lie to a boy by covering your face with that?*

I did not want to become my mother because I was not a woman. I loved women because I thought about them. I thought about them too much, which was why I was not one of them.

I did not want to become my mother; I wanted to be you. You with your dark hair cropped close to your nape, a curl of white behind your ear because I had decided I wanted it dyed when I was grown. You were not afraid of thoughts that were not your own or the red spots glaring from my skin when I leaned in for inspection. You came from someplace inside, where I needed you.

* * *

When I was younger, I would peer inside my mirror by tilting the glass wings until the reflections bounced against each other into infinity, and a geometric chimera of me was born.

They grinned when I grinned, waved when I waved, up to a blurred, flesh-colored point too far away where it was impossible to tell anymore. This would be now.

Mom said to throw away what I didn't need before I moved out, so I folded the pink plastic trifold and drove to the landfill alone.

I haven't spoken to you in a long time. This embarrassed me—I had accidentally outgrown you in the way my face now shot up beyond the top of the mirror. Although I'm taking it to the burial site for unwanted things in open caskets, know that I'm not throwing you away. I had grown up; I was still growing up. It was like diving into the ocean, or its opposite, watching my hand wave endlessly into the glass panes, a process reaching with relentless fingers into the future, forever. Until you become me, until I look into a mirror and see your face.

“Human diversity is the component of our race that truly makes it so extraordinary.”

—Savannah Grannan

Honorable Mention

BOOK BANS PROMPT

Seeing Purple

By Savannah Grannan

Lemon Bay High School

Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple* has had an impact on my worldview that I can never hope to repay. As much as I love writing and pride myself on my way with words, when I start to think of how to do justice to the impact Walker had on me with this book, my throat clogs up and tears spring forward and it's like *I can't breathe* because how do you describe something as important as this? So, you might consider this as my attempt at a love letter to Walker's writing.

Walker has a special way of getting readers attached to her characters—the personal connection you feel as you see each of her innermost thoughts of the most important events through her life. Because of this, you are forced to live through lives so separate and diverse in addition to your own—something that is critical to our development and utterly priceless. I firmly believe that all people need to be exposed to many different perspectives outside of their own.

Human diversity is the component of our race that truly makes it so extraordinary. And it's different backgrounds and perspectives and identities that makes our race what it is. And while there is an infinite amount of possible thoughts and experiences, there are still unifying struggles that anyone can relate to; for example, I think that everyone—at some point in their lives—struggles to find a reason to remain happy. This search takes on a whole different meaning when you follow along a life as troubling as Celie's within this book. After all, if someone like Celie—who had no legitimate reason to smile in her life—can become content just for being alive, there is hope for anyone else. Even hope for me.

And Celie's arduous path to finding love? Throughout the book, Celie discovers that love transcends all barriers of time and distance, as shown through her relationship with her sister and her lover Shug. In all that she is deprived of freedom and control in her life, Celie's love is truly the only thing that is hers and hers alone. She has her own body, mind, and soul, and because of that, she has her love—both for her people and her life. Seeing as I myself have a sister that I would do anything for, seeing the extent of Celie and Nettie's love for each other was powerful and exceedingly moving. When I first read this book, I was going through a really hard time in my life in regards to what was important to me and maintaining my connections with those around me. My relationship with my brother has never been a good one, and I felt that my sister was all that I had to protect. However, we had been growing distant with the passing of time.

However, seeing what had been done to Celie and Nettie, and being forced to witness the terrible impact that separation had caused these two sisters lit a fire within me, and I grew redetermined to never let my sister distance herself from me emotionally. I put myself in the shoes of sisters who had lost each other, and whose bond did not waver even after decades of no contact and was reminded of the strength that the bond of sisterhood holds.

Celie's love for Shug is arguably even more important for me to see, because while Celie never felt any shame for her love for Shug, I certainly can not relate to that. Since I was maybe eleven years old, I knew that I loved . . . different. And because of my upbringing and the social conditions around me, I hated that part of me. I hid and I cried and I cursed my own love for what it was. Being able to see Celie love unabashedly—even in her letter to God—was something that I didn't know I needed until it was set before my eyes. Celie has faced terrors in her life that I would not wish upon anybody, and still she was shown that she is still human—fully capable of having feelings and being seen. And to have this intimate and explicitly romantic love be between two women was so impactful both to the story and to those who have read it. Not only did it show that they were just two women who were trying to live as best they can—not sexualizing or dehumanizing sapphic characters like fiction so often does—but it also showed that a love like theirs can have such a positive impact on the people involved. Shug showed Celie that she can find joy in being alive, and

Celie's change showed me that my love is not something to be scorned so easily. My love is a symbol of my humanity, and it is one that I can not afford to have taken from me without a fight.

Celie's trials and evolution has given me reason to actively refrain from taking things for granted or losing myself to darker thoughts. Celie learning to just be content—or even happy—without questioning why she was put through what she's been put through makes her the epitome of strength to me. She enjoys her life regardless of what was done to her just because she can, which means that, no matter what, I can share this love as well for as long as I will live.

Given how much this book and the characters within it mean to me (much more than was even stated within this response), it can be inferred as to how hurtful it was to learn that the Florida legislatures were going to censor so many different books based solely on a type of love like my own—a love that is shared by so many people within our population. The anger and loss that I felt when learning that those in power would go as far as to ban literature shadowed my faith in our future. The very people who have sworn to protect and represent all aspects of this state equally and without bias want to censor us as if we were vile. With this ban, it has revealed that in their eyes, we are preying on the youth—like some vicious dog ridden with disease.

Something that they need to protect the precious minds of the children of this generation from. I felt utterly devastated. And cheated. And cast out. It was as if I was forced to relive every dark and terrible thought from my early years about just how much I did not belong with those who lived around me. As if it wasn't enough that I did not look the same, what with my missing right arm and all of that. Now I had to be reminded that the inside of myself was just as unfit for public acceptance as my outside. With literature, you are supposed to be able to freely explore what might not be normal in the environment around you. People of all ages should be able to explore different possibilities and find acceptance in other worlds within books that they might not be granted in their real lives. Because of all of this mess, I learned that *The Color Purple* itself impacted my life positively with the content between its pages. And, in a similar vein, the negative reaction that so many people had to the accessibility of this book really solidified to me how important diverse literature is to our general public—especially in our education. If I was not encouraged to

read this book for a school project, I would have gone my entire life without the joy and renewed ideologies that this book has granted me. I can only hope that there will be some sort of change in the near future that will emphasize how important it is for people to be able to read freely and find a book that can shed light onto their lives the same way Alice Walker's work did for me.



Penguin
Random
House

In partnership with

WNDB®
weneeddiversebooks.org

Creative Writing Awards



Allison Curletto
Sofia Hernandez
Anika Bukkapatnam
Ella Ferrell
Amber Shen
Kellen Hunnicutt
Nazgol Missaghi
Lily Smith

J'Auna Demming
Abigail Kabagambe
Halle Saldivia
Morgan Shirley
Rubie Lombardi
Jessica Li
Savannah Grannan



Penguin
Random
House

1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
(212) 782-9348 FAX (212) 782-5157

creativewriting@penguinrandomhouse.com

social-impact.penguinrandomhouse.com/creativewriting